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IN MEMORIAM

James Ferguson on Development, Modernity, and Labor

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I ran across Jim Ferguson's first book, *The Anti-Politics Machine* (Ferguson 1990), shortly after it appeared on a bookshelf in the intellectually exciting chaos of Stanley Trapido's house in Oxford. Stan was one of the editors of the *Journal of Southern African Studies* and one of the most original and influential voices in the history of that part of Africa. Thumbing through the book I was intrigued and asked Stan if I could review it for the journal; this kind of personalized informality was how things were done in those days. Stan agreed. Some months later my review came out, with the following first sentence: "This is one of the most innovative and stimulating books I have read in recent years" (Cooper 1990). I usually don't write in such an effusive style, but thirty-five years later it is clear that Jim's book has had a multidimensional impact on the study of a region, of unequal political relations, of the connection between conceptual thinking and the study of material life. Not least of its achievements was to open up what has since become a lively field: the history, politics, and ethnography of economic development.

Shortly after reading *The Anti-Politics Machine*, it was my pleasure to meet Jim and his partner Liisa Malkki during an all-too-short period when we overlapped in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Rereading some of Jim's major books in the last weeks reminds me how much Jim's writing as an anthropologist reverberates with my concerns as a historian. Both disciplines, at their best, combine attention to the specificities of time and place with attention to connections that cross such lines. Jim astutely points to what is lost when anthropologists, if asked about Africa, reply "I don't know about 'Africa,' but let me tell you about where I worked" (Ferguson 2006, 3). This observation could just as easily be made about historians. Jim makes this point in the context of a discussion of how complicated it is to write about "Africa" in a way that simultaneously takes into account the continent's diversity, its connections and commonalities, and the ways in which certain outsiders project a demeaning homogeneity on African social formations. His observations and his questions are still relevant to the way research and writing are conducted today, about Africa and other parts of the world.

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Before *The Anti-Politics Machine*, there had been considerable debate among practitioners over development policies, and some institutional histories had been published, particularly of British development programs. Jim's initiative was much more creative and insightful. It was both a reading of the discourse of actors in the development business and an ethnography of what they did on the ground, but most importantly it was a macrosociology of what development programs meant in the context of southern Africa. He showed that development initiatives—his focus was a project organized by the Canadian government with World Bank support—were intended to solve a problem that did not exist while obscuring the political and historical bases of poverty in the region. The development agencies defined the problem as aboriginal poverty: farming and pastoralism in Lesotho reflected social and technological backwardness and the remedy was to teach Africans methods to integrate themselves into a capitalist world economy, making them into farmers and cattle raisers like those of the (idealized) Western world. But in reality, the problem of the people of Lesotho was that they were all too well integrated into the capitalist world economy, under the thumb of mining and agricultural powers of South Africa, that took away their land, enforced segregation, and reduced the role of the people of Lesotho to that of labor migrants to South Africa's gold mines and other white-owned enterprises.

The government of Lesotho—led by Africans but subject to the power of South Africa—had an interest, as did the aid establishment, in treating development as a technical rather than political issue. Jim understood perfectly well that depoliticization is itself a political phenomenon. In that sense, the politicization of development has become a major theme of scholarly investigation in the burgeoning field of development history (Borowy et al. 2022). In British and French Africa, beginning in the late 1930s, colonial governments tried to counter rising social movements, particularly from urban workers, with programs intended to provide some resources in the most vulnerable cities, for example through the British Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940. These were, within the colonial context, breakthroughs, going against the previous tendency to insist that Africans were poor because they were primitive. British and French governments focused instead on the areas most affected by colonial capitalism. In fact, the resources devoted to development were small, especially when compared to the resources colonial regimes and corporations were draining from the continent.

Political movements in Africa began to embrace the development concept, arguing that only an African government could ensure that development would be conducted in the interest of Africans. Labor movements were not easily deflected from their demands for wages and benefits equal to those of European workers by poorly funded programs for housing and urban amenities. By the mid-1950s, colonial governments—having now staked their claim to legitimacy in terms of promoting development—began to realize that they would be facing political and social movements insisting that if Africans were to remain "British" or "French," there was no stopping point to demands except an equal standard of living for people in colonies and metropole. For the first time, both imperial governments undertook serious cost-benefit analyses of their colonial adventures, a factor

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among others leading them to ask whether it made economic and political sense to keep insisting that Africans must remain within a French or British polity (Cooper 1996). Development went from a colonial project—trying to save colonial rule by reforming it—to a decolonizing project—an attempt to give newly independent governments a reason to maintain and improve their ties to a capitalist world economy (or in other contexts to tie them to a communist world economy).

By the time of Jim's fieldwork, Western regimes were becoming skeptical of the efficacy of their development initiatives and increasingly willing to write off Africa rather than to pursue the initiative. They imposed structural adjustment and austerity on most African countries. Development returned to the international agenda in the early 2000s—without receiving anything close to adequate funding for such an effort—but the recent decision of the Trump Administration to eliminate USAID has revealed that however limited American foreign aid has been, it provided something that resource-starved societies needed, most visibly in the domain of health. Perhaps the awareness of how many lives are affected by the withdrawal of treatment programs for HIV, malaria, and other diseases will lead to more thinking about development that focuses on this reality.

Jim was a pioneer in opening the anthropological and historical study of development to rigorous and critical investigation. He played a key role in a project sponsored by the Social Science Research Council in the early 1990s that I was engaged in, including three workshops exploring from different perspectives the connection between development and the social sciences. A selection of these papers, including Jim's essay on the significance of development to the discipline of anthropology, was later published (Cooper and Packard 1997). Alongside the expansion of historical and anthropological research into development issues, there has been a less productive tendency in Western scholarship to treat development as an unwanted discourse imposed by "the West" on other parts of the world, rather than a much more ambiguous politics that both maintains and confronts the asymmetrical relationship of different parts of the world, with immediate and serious material consequences for people lacking resources.

Jim, however, was quite willing to confront the material and cultural ambiguities of social transformation. His second book, *Expectations of Modernity* (Ferguson 1999) revealed an important chronology. With fieldwork focused on what Zambians made of their economic and social situation, he brought out the rise and fall of their expectations. Thanks to claims made by trade unionists and political leaders during the struggles over colonial rule in the 1950s and 1960s, copper miners in Zambia improved their wages, benefits, and their hopes that their children would continue to see improved living chances. This part of Jim's book resonates with my own research on labor in French and British Africa (Cooper 1996) when labor was making substantial gains in the context of a crisis of colonialism, but Jim takes the story to the next phase. The world recession of the 1970s and the collapse of copper prices dashed miners' hopes. Indeed, it was the fact that most miners hadn't completely severed their ties with earlier forms of economic activity, especially small-scale farming, that saved many from utter destitution. The "modernity" of Jim's title, unlike that of much anthropological

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literature that sees modernity as an imposition to be critiqued, has a strong material component. In a collection of essays published some years later (Ferguson 2006, 31–33), Jim pointed out that social scientists' critique of modernity or their quest for "alternative modernities" missed Africans' "aspiration to rise in the world in economic and political terms; to improve one's way of life, one's standing, one's place-in-the-world" (32), an argument with interesting parallels (without our having compared notes) to my essay on modernity I published around the same time (Cooper 2005). The tragedy for the people concerned was that they saw something to be gained in development and modernization, only to find their hopes dashed and themselves left impoverished and marginalized.

Jim's book of 2015, *Give a Man a Fish* (Ferguson 2015), takes the story to yet another phase and it confronts one of the disturbing ironies of the long-run history of work in Africa. From the sixteenth century to the nineteenth, millions of Africans were shipped as slaves to work on European-owned plantations in the Americas, a process integral to the development of capitalism. In the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, European and American governments were striving to keep Africans *out* of their countries. It is now Africans who take the initiative, risking their lives, to get to Europe. These migrants are, in effect, saying "exploit me." And while many are being exploited, the answer to this demand is frequently, "no, just stay away." Jim addresses the problem of what can be done for people whom capital no longer wants to exploit, and he raises the possibility of basic income support, which would help keep people alive and potentially give them a base from which to seek some kind of gainful employment within Africa. The possibility has been under consideration in South Africa. Jim helped to open up what has become a major topic in the study of labor in the present conjuncture—the precarity of people whom capital no longer needs (Cooper 2017). The issue remains of what is lost to capital as well as to African people through this unexploited labor power. Looking at the question in these terms forces us to confront the profound implications of the imbalance between private accumulation and public goods. In fact, there is plenty of work for Africans to do—building communications networks, railways that connect different parts of Africa to each other rather than drain products toward the outside world, medical facilities, schools. The problem isn't that there isn't work to be done but the absence of funding for public goods and the extreme concentration of resources in a small, international class of people. Jim concludes his book by reminding the reader of the importance of inventiveness in history—something easily forgotten in what in 2026 is a more pessimistic age than the time when Jim published this book eleven years ago.

This quick survey of Jim's best-known books—and I haven't even touched on his other publications—underscores his enormous contribution to thinking about Africans' place in the world. For all the shifts in fads during Jim's career, he remained committed to the study of political economy. Critical as he was of conventional perspectives in economics and anthropology, he did not limit himself to "critique" but continued to emphasize the need for empirical investigation of the situations Africans confronted and their perspectives on those situations. His commitment to scholarship that touches the realities of people's

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lives and the richness and thoughtfulness of his writing should serve as an inspiration to future generations of students of Africa.

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