

'Progressive' Thinking

Review: *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* by James Ferguson

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Modernization is most simply defined as the adoption of contemporary ways, ideas, or styles. As a theory in international politics and development studies, modernization is guided by the assumption that underdevelopment is a primary condition out of which all states must evolve if they are to attain development. Inherent in this belief is that development, typified by the establishment of industrial urbanization, is the desired state. Under the guidance of this metanarrative, consciously induced policies were implemented when colonial interest in the postwar period moved from acquisition to control¹. The continued use of this approach in Africa involves the transformation of traditional tribal cultures into modern, urbanized environments characteristic of the Western World. The implied link with this type of linear progression is the promise of a better future, both economically and socially, for the developing country.

James Ferguson stands as a strong voice against the modernization paradigm. His 1999 publication, *Expectations of Modernity*,

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boldly argues against the application of the modernization metanarrative by exemplifying its inability to account for trends in Zambia's recent history of economic decline. The goal of the book is to facilitate understanding by taking a "nonlinear, non-teleological trajectory of the Copperbelt seriously... [by applying] a different set of theoretical and methodological tools"². His project is appropriately termed an 'ethnography of decline,' as it is crafted to reconcile ethnographic and theoretical understandings of a 'developing' Africa. Although Ferguson does not strive to provide a social history of the Copperbelt, his engagement with mineworkers and informants entangled in the highly exploitative resource extraction industry provides the basis for him to develop a historically directed rejection of the modernization hypothesis. Intricate case-study analyses highlight that the modernization view is overly simplistic and fails to reflect reality; it has acted more as a myth in African society. Ultimately, Ferguson helps to develop a deeper understanding of the situation in modern Zambian culture within its complexities; this is an interesting and important contrast to traditional theoretical depictions of linear progression and modernization of Africa.

The logic and consistency of Ferguson's work, the thoroughness of his study and his eloquent literary style and presentation give his conclusions force and conviction. The logical structure of his argument comes from its grounding in theoretical assessments. In rejecting the modernist metanarrative, Ferguson does not 'take down' traditional (modernist) theoretical perspectives, but identifies their weaknesses in light of the realities of urbanization uncovered in his research of Copperbelt life.³ In so doing, he confronts the work of scholars who have studied the Copperbelt with a modernization perspective. Ferguson develops a new set of powerful theoretical tools to uncover and examine Zambia's intricate cultural system, which is overlooked by the traditional modernization interpretations. He does not claim to provide answers, but rather, is searching to develop understanding. The argument Ferguson puts forward is persuasive, as it remains open to counter-evidence and the possibility of future debate. The falsifiability of *Expectations of Modernity* Modernization Modernization solidifies its importance in the development of deeper understandings about the dynamics of the socio-political world.

Unlike traditional ethnographers, Ferguson acknowledges and empowers the complexity of modern life. The range of reactions and strategies adopted by Africans, and their continual shifts over time, give Ferguson the proof he needs to show that reality on the Copperbelt cannot sustain a simple linear narration. In strengthening the idea that Africans have, and continue to develop highly organized 'survival

strategies' to cope with modern issues, the complexity of their life is reflected. His conception of the 'cosmopolitan' and 'localist' African are prime examples of how Ferguson produces a new framework, based on a local perspectives and empirical evidence, from which one can interpret Zambia's perplexing cultural situation.⁴ In contrast, modernization stories that develop a linear progression naively ignore the unique and unpredictable nature of human life in the pursuit of generalized theories.

Ferguson forms a strong critique of modernization by showing how (1) it failed to represent distinctive patterns of social change and (2) the economic collapse of Zambia proves the need to abandon this concept as a metanarrative of development. Although Ferguson's critique of modernization has helped restructure traditional studies of ethnographic anthropology, the analytical tools he offers also have profound political components. Instead of withdrawing politics from the ethnographic study, he calls for a new politicized humanitarianism to push the issue of global inequalities higher on the world's agenda. In this way, Ferguson manages to extend the book beyond the boundaries of its research design. In its final chapter, *Expectations of Modernity* suggests that the brutalities of global capitalism have dashed the aspirations of many developing countries, of which Zambia is just a good example. In this bold and brave statement, Ferguson explains that the "abjection"⁵ felt by the Copperbelt mineworkers is a type of expulsion and disconnection that is common throughout the world. In all its humiliation, this process of abjection has structured a world not merely of connections, but also of deep disconnections between people and places. Such a world-view restructures global politics in the hopes of understanding some of the disturbing trends and notions of reality today.

Expectations of Modernity encourages its readers to believe in a 'messy' world, which can no longer be the subject of simplistic modernization studies and analyses of development. The creativity and affirmation of James Ferguson's study is a result of his call for new analytical tools to examine a complex world filled with fascinating and difficult processes. The book's theoretical sophistication, involved local research, eloquent description, and sound documentation allow lingering assumptions of modernization to be challenged and its status as a theory to be designated as a myth of the Copperbelt. Ferguson recognizes progressive thinking as the search for understanding. It is in this way that he emerges from his book as an inventive political thinker excited about the prospects of theoretical change.

Notes

¹ Lewellen, *Dependency and Development: An Introduction to the Third World* (Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey, 1995).

² Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 20.

³ Ferguson relies on the case of Zambia as proof, but suggests that other nations in the Third World experience similar trends. Even without statistical knowledge and understanding of alternative anti-modernization Third World developments, he makes a persuasive argument for his case and modernity's totalizing capability. In particular, it is interesting to see how the Copperbelt case runs so far off the modernization 'track' and to see his theoretical tools evolve within a specific time and space.

⁴ In order to replace the Eurocentric distinction of the tribesman and the townsman, the rural and the urban African, Ferguson adopts a continuum between localist and cosmopolitan ideals, in which certain traits, styles and strategies are used by Zambians to cope with and make sense of new phenomena in African society.

⁵ "Abjection refers to the process of being thrown aside, expelled, or discarded. But its literal meaning also implies not just being thrown out but being thrown *down* - thus expulsion but also debasement and humiliation." (See Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*, 236.)