James Ferguson and his critique on modernity: Analyzing *Expectation of Modernity*

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ABSTRACT

The book review reveals the issue of modernity from James Ferguson's *Expectation of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* which is dismantling and heart-breaking. This well written and thick seven chapters book is based on Ferguson's ethnographic fieldwork in Copperbelt, Zambia, between 1970s-1990s. The book introduced what is called as the ethnography of decline, a way of understanding people's point of view about their own experience of social, cultural, and economic 'advance' and 'decline'. A very hard task for ethnographers since they must deal with the situation instead of working with people. Related to that, Ferguson also explores a concept called 'abjection', a process of being thrown (down) aside, expelled, or discarded. Using this concept, he claims that modernity is quite similar to colonialism which brings the dichotomy of 'the west' and 'the rest' where the west is 'modern' and the rest is 'savage'. Thus, globalization of economy brought by modernisation, has been experienced as abjection and disconnection, leading to a conclusion that modernity is no more than a myth that would never exist.

1. What is Modernity? – An Introduction

What is modernity? Is it a particular state in the history of society when people live in prosperity? If so, how society is considered as modern? Is modernisation always westernisation? These questions are always relevant to be asked. Before I read Ferguson (and other materials related to the issue of modernity), I used to think that 'modernisation' could be a solution for every problem in 'the third world'. Almost everyone in Indonesia also perceives modernity as a solution for the better life. However, modernity is like two sides of coin. On the one hand, it is a 'promise' of 'positive development' towards a 'better life'. On the other hand, it can be a 'myth', something that would never happen. This essay will explore and analyse more about the issue of modernity from James Ferguson's *Expectation of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* which is dismantling and heart-breaking.

2. No One Understand What Happened? – Contextualising the Issues

The book itself is based on an ethnographic fieldwork (in Copperbelt, Zambia) between 1970s-1990s (the book is published in 1999). This book is divided into seven chapters, and I have to admit that the book is very fascinating. It is well written and quite thick (even though Ferguson claimed that he does not want to write the 'thick description'). At first, I found that due to its thickness, it is unavoidable for Ferguson to be quite repetitive in some parts, made me 'skip' some of his sentences since I thought that I already knew it before. However, Dureau, a supervisor of mine in the University of Auckland explained in one of the course that there is a reason why scholars repeating something; it can be the way writers bring back the discussion to a particular topic from previous part or it can be an emphasis of the very important argument.

Through this book, Ferguson brings me to Zambia (particularly Copperbelt), one of the countries in the southern part of Africa that emerged in the 1960s to 1970s considered as the 'next superpower' in Africa with all its expectation of the modernity that would never come (even Zambia government wanted to defeat America by developing a space program that would never be implemented)[1]. At first, Ferguson tells a background story of the 'emerging Africa' which I found very interesting and insightful. It was when the copper mining seemed very promising in the future and Zambians came to the city with the high hopes of prosperity, modernity and good times in retiring ages. However, when the price and the export of copper declined dramatically in the 1970s – 1980s, the country had changed. As explained by Ferguson's informants, life became harder and harder ('down, down, down'), prices skyrocketed, crimes became commonplace and lifetime security became worthless. Zambians' dream of 'modern Africa' turned into ashes.

Neither Ferguson nor the Zambians understand what happened. Interestingly, as a scholar, Ferguson came up with important questions, "what happens to anthropological understanding in a situation where 'the native' as well as the ethnographer lack a good understanding of what is going on around them?" Or what if both 'the local people' and the anthropologists feel alienated and unconnected? So, in the middle of such confusion, Ferguson kept doing his fieldwork without the comfort of a local bounded community, working in the middle of rapid social transformation. He then brought the idea of ethnography of decline, a way of understanding people's point of view about their own experience of social, cultural, and economic 'advance' and 'decline'. Instead of analysing spatial community and occupational categories, in his ethnography of decline, Ferguson analysed 'a mode of conceptualizing, narrating, and experiencing socioeconomic change and its encounter with a confounding process of economic decline' (1999:21). In brief, ethnography of decline requires ethnographers to work with the situation instead of working with the people. It is, indeed, a very difficult situation. Ferguson even admits that what he discovered was something that ethical and methodological difficulties that he was not well prepared to deal with. His fieldwork left him with a terrible sense of sadness (1999:18).

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[1] See for instance *The Time When Zambia Tried to Go to Mars*
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7TI9ixb-a5M)

3. A "Mine" of Fieldwork – Tension among Anthropologists

It is interesting to note that southern Africa (especially Copperbelt) has become the specific area for anthropologists conducting fieldworks in the topics of 'social change' and 'urbanisation' for many years. Ferguson exemplifies how Africa attracted anthropologists (in the past) with the case of debate between the Rhodes-Livingstone Institue (RLI) anthropologist and the colonial anthropologists. The RLI were considered themselves to be progressive in their political position (actually, they were colonial 'liberal'), meanwhile colonial anthropologists became the loyal servants of the colonial system, reproducing colonial ideology through their analyses. However, both the RLI and the colonial anthropologist were criticised by Ferguson since they 'used' their capability as scholars for the political interest. Some of them were considered as 'racist' and antagonistic towards the settlers (1999:31-32). They claimed that they battled the racism, understood and defended the Africans, but, practically, it was just a sense of paternalism.

Furthermore, Ferguson criticised the widely accepted general pictures of history about the migration and urbanization in Zambia, particularly the rural-urban dichotomy (1999:40-41) since Ferguson built a new alternative way of conceptualisation to understand the relation of rural-urban in contemporary Zambia. For instance, Ferguson strongly criticised the arguments that perceived people who were the migrant workers left from rural area to Copperbelt were those who moved from 'underdeveloped' situation to the more developed state. This kind of view is clearly derived from Western standard of 'development' which is related to the issue of 'modernity'. In brief, leaving the village, living in the urban and becoming migrant workers is considered as a form of 'development', giving a sense of getting closer to modernity (in the eyes of Western standard). Moreover, Ferguson also stated that the dream of becoming more 'modern' was perceived by the Zambians due to the chances of having a better life. People from rural areas migrated to the cities with all of their expectations of permanence. Some of them brought their families to live with, while some others left their families but still had responsibilities by sending money to them.

Ferguson quite criticised such ethnographic works that have been tied with evolutionary-dualist model of social and cultural changes. Typologising by giving terms such as 'primitive' and 'civilised', 'traditional' and 'modern', or 'rural' and 'urban' might seems too simplistic since the situation is far more complex and the interconnection of rural-urban could not be understood in such dualist terms (1999:90). Ferguson argued that the relation is more than just dichotomy of rural and urban, but at some points, it could be a 'transitionary hybrid' or a combination of two 'basic' where 'pure social type' such as which one is considered as 'rural' and which one is 'urban' was very hard to separate. Ferguson gave examples of this situation by explaining how people who used to live in the villages brought their way of live to the city and after returning 'home' or villages, they then also brought 'urban way of life'. In brief, some of the migrant workers were 'dualist' people whose rural (village/traditional) and urban (modern/European) way of life fused in their selves, becoming what Ferguson defined as 'style'.

4. The Ethnography of Decline

Ferguson also mentioned the cultural compliance related to the localism. He claimed that localism is an 'urban' style (not a rural one) but it is linked to (specifically, signifying) rural life. It has close relation with micropolitic economic attachments. Ferguson exemplified this relation in the end of the chapter three. Migrant workers are 'compelled' and 'obligated' to return 'home' in their retirement since they have economic responsibilities with their rural kin whose are really dependent on them. The dependency of rural kin to the migrant workers does not make the migrant workers 'overpowered' the rural kin. In fact, both of them have power in different degrees and in different situation. Ferguson argues that the key to cultural localism is the exerted control by rural kin over urban workers. However, besides the 'economic tribute', cultural compliance is something necessary for the migrant workers if they finally coming home. In brief, cultural compliance is a cultural package of ethical (or behavioural) expectations (manners, conduct, speech and dress) of rural kin to their 'migrant family members' (1999:112-113). For instance, rural kin expect ideal behaviour (normative values) to the migrants such as showing respect and regard or forbidding of showing off, being pompous or underestimating other rural members. If they 'fail', they would be rejected by the rural society. Even in some cases, they believe that they will be the object of witchcraft or sorcery of their rural kin and neighbours which undoubtedly emerged social anxiety.

Ferguson's "Back to the Land?" chapter is full of 'heart-breaking' stories cases (except the last two success stories). Each case describes the story of the ex-mineworkers who had three options of settlement after their contracts are finished, namely: staying in town, 'going home', or settling on the rural of Copperbelt. Staying in town is the rational reason for those who 'does not have place to go' but had massive source of cash income since without huge amount of money, the city could easily 'kill' them. Going home became the rational option (and most common choice of mineworkers) since they could gather with their kin and neighbours, started agricultural activities (maize farming was the most popular at that time) and formed 'a new life'. The third option is selected if they could not stay in town or go back home was settled in rural areas of Copperbelt. Economically, people could obtain land with cheaper price which was close to the urban market so they could easily start commercial farming. In addition, socially, for those who wanted to continuously 'avoid' their family and neighbours from their 'home village', this is the best option. Even though ideally, they had three choices, Ferguson claims that in reality, the forces pushing back urban worker to return to a home village (or to a rural area where they had relatives) were stronger since they simply thought that they have no other choice (1999:127). Nevertheless, based on the cases that Ferguson presented through the book, going back to the land required economic resources and social preparation. Ferguson believes that it is not the wage-earning failure that pushed people back to their 'home village' but it is their wage-earning success.

Furthermore, the cases that Ferguson presents describe how different assets (economic, social, and cultural) contribute to face the challenges in the retirement age when the ex-mineworkers left employment. By using terms namely localists and cosmopolitans, Ferguson succeeded to convey the argument that on the one hand, localists may have

social and cultural assets but they live in the very poor condition such as lack of financial supports. However, on the other hand, cosmopolitans may have money (economic asset) but get in trouble with cultural and social assets such as support from their kin or neighbours. Overall, Ferguson argues that 'different workers had different amounts, and mixtures, of economic, social, and cultural assets' which some of these combinations worked and some did note; some ex-mineworkers did reasonably well, while others failed miserably (1999:165). All of them are illustrated in every case and the nexus of all of them are the micropolitical economic social relations (particularly for the urban workers).

Besides the theory, arguments, critiques and new insights concerning Copperbelt in a whole that Ferguson brings in *Expectation of Modernity,* it is the way Ferguson delivers the discussion of ethnography of decline that makes this book so special. I have mentioned in several paragraphs above that the cases are extremely well-described even though Ferguson actually 'worked' with the situation instead of the people. Ferguson is evocative. He can explain the understandings or point of view of the informants related to their 'poor' life or 'bad' situation faced by their country. Moreover, what I really appreciate, and I have learnt a lot is the way Ferguson brings ethnography to the 'next-level' of empathy. I once again restate that Ferguson is telling heart-breaking stories about the hard life that his informants had. To my mind, he did a good job as a 'medium' or maybe a 'mouthpiece' for their informants (like in the letters when his informant asked for help) to communicate the situation of Zambia to the world. With very emotive touch helped with letters and 'people watching' scattered across the book, readers can empathise with situations that was faced by Ferguson's informants. I believe that a successful ethnography is a work that has an impact not only for the informants but also for the readers such as affecting emotion where the readers join to empathise (like our emotion to the characters of novel or a short story).

5. "Noise" – The Reinterpretation of Culture

Ferguson also discusses the dismantling definition (or he tried to reinterpret) of culture as 'not only simply a system of communication but also a system of miscommunication' (1999:210) which he elaborates more as whether it is 'something that has meaning' for the explainable social significances or it is a 'noise', something that is unexplainable or 'have-no-clear' meaning. It is beyond of Geertz explanation about culture as a symbolic system of shared meaning (1973:5). Ferguson claims that the road to ethnographic interpretation cannot be simply to understand the meaning of the code (or semiotic system), but ethnographers should deal with the analyses of 'noise' seriously whether it is understandable or not since the signifying actors might have social reasons to rupture the communication instead of developing it.

The categorisation that Ferguson brought concerning the reinterpretation of definition of culture is worked well with the concept of 'cultural compliance' where people are suspended between the idea of modernity and traditional life. It is because indeed, some of the ex-mineworkers are 'trapped' in that situation in the middle of their searching for modernity. Ferguson uses term of 'cosmopolitanism' to categorise such people. It is an opposite term of 'localism' and both of them are like two sides of coin. 'Cosmopolitan' appears as a defiance and rejection of localist expectations. In localist perspective,

cosmopolitan is a rule-breaker, a gesture of anti-membership, and a person who lack of humility and loyalty. However, in the eye of cosmopolitan, they perceive themselves as 'citizens of the world' where they assure that they do not fit within the 'localist world' and they are free from all of localist's claims and expectations. Nevertheless, Ferguson argues that cosmopolitanism is a different term with 'Western culture'. Becoming cosmopolitan does not mean becoming the 'West'. Instead, it is more generically becoming 'international', a new urban culture emerging as the consequence of 'modernity'.

Another interesting point that I would like to discuss related to the idea of modernity is what Ferguson called as 'abjection'. It is a concept that refers to a process of being thrown (down) aside, expelled, or discarded (1999:236). Ferguson clearly states that this is the precisely 'sad' reality that he encountered in his fieldwork. The Zambians (particularly the mine-workers) are 'interconnected' with the 'globalising world', a 'modern world' with promises of prosperity that they are dreaming for. But at the same time, the more they try to chase that 'ideal state', the more they are cast outward and downward as the 'second class'. Metaphorically, imagine a group of rich and popular people had a party in a mansion and they invite and persuade you to come and join them. However, when you want to enter the room, they kick you out and close the door, leaving you alone in the cold winter night, watching them have fun from the outside window. Immediately, you are becoming discarded, disallowed, and disconnected. All of the promises had been betrayed. Indeed, this situation is affected by the macropolitical economy, namely global capitalism. It is obvious that the world 'only' needs Zambian's copper in a mission of connecting the world via wire bars producing cable power and telephone but ironically, it is disconnecting Zambia to the world. In brief, what Ferguson argues is that globalization of economy has been experienced as abjection and disconnection (1999:253). Therefore, modernity is no more than a myth that would never exist.

6. Conclusion

As a conclusion, it is clear now that modernity is not merely a particular state in the history of humankind. More than, modernity is quite similar to colonialism which brings the dichotomy of 'the west' and 'the rest' where the west is 'modern' and the rest is 'savage'. Thus, even though colonialism and modernity became a mission, a kind of 'holy call' to diminish the savagery, the notions always required an 'Other' and 'Elsewhere' (Trouillot, 2002:850). The 'modern world', led by the North Atlantic countries (which Trouillot described as the North Atlantic Universals), has everything to do with political economy. Modernisation means putting global capitalism in specific locales and in some cases, it is problematic (such us Zambia). The concept of modernity as a myth stated by Ferguson is very similar with Trouillot definition of modernity as a 'utopia', a promise or dangerous illusion (2003:23). Both of them are similar, if we use the Western standard of modernisation, 'the savage' will never become 'modern'. In brief, modernity is like two sides of coin. It is a 'promise' of 'positive development' towards a 'better life'. On the other hand, it can be a 'myth', something that would never happen.

Conflict of Interest:
The author declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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The Time When Zambia Tried to Go to Mars (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7TI9ixb-a5M) (accessed date: October 27th, 2020)