Theory Talks

Presents

THEORY TALK #34

JAMES FERGUSON ON MODERNITY, DEVELOPMENT, AND READING FOUCAULT IN LESOTHO

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

James Ferguson on Modernity, Development, and Reading Foucault in Lesotho

IR is of course not the only discipline with a global view. Anthropology, for one, has long shed light on the same problems as IR, yet casting surprisingly different shadows. *Theory Talks* proudly presents a contribution from a cutting-edge anthropologist – possibly the field's most globally oriented scholar – Professor James Ferguson. In this comprehensive *Talk*, Ferguson engages – amongst others – with the status of the state in IR, with modernity as a category, and challenges critical conceptions of common conceptions surrounding development and Africa.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge or principal debate currently in global (or globally oriented) studies? What would be your position or answer to this challenge or debate?

The first thing I think of in response to that question is more of an attitude than a kind of theoretical issue, properly speaking. And that is the need to approach these questions with a sense of curiosity and open-mindedness.

One of the things that bothers me about a lot of what I read the in social science that's, as you say, 'globally oriented', is that it seems to start with a bunch of certainties, a bunch of assumptions – a kind of Western liberal common sense – that we know how countries ought to be organized. They *ought* to be democracies; they *ought* to respect human rights; they *ought* to guarantee the rule of law; they *ought* to be at peace with their neighbors. And then you look at, say, a country in Africa and all you're able to see is a series of lacks – of things that *should* be there but aren't. And you end up constructing huge parts of the world as just sort of empty spaces where things ought to be there but aren't. And it leads to a kind of impoverished understanding, I think, because you don't really understand what *is* going on here. How do people conduct their affairs? How is legitimate authority exercised? How are rules made and enforced? You know, all the kinds of questions that ought to be the starting place tend to disappear or recede into the background. So, I think the real challenge is to approach this whole question with a sense of openness, a willingness to be surprised and learn something new and not to be so deductive.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in your scholarship?

Well, I guess I first was captured by anthropology as a field. I became interested in the anthropology of Africa, in particular, because of my teachers. The people who taught me anthropology – people like David Brokensha and Paul Bohannan – were Africanists, so the anthropology I learned was, first of all, the anthropology of Africa.

Then, as time wore on – this was the late 1970s – I was increasingly interested in the politics of Southern Africa in particular and the liberation struggles that were going on there. And I became troubled by the gap between the two – one the one hand this sort of academic literature on African societies in anthropology and on the other hand all these interesting events surrounding the struggles against the last vestiges of colonialism in Southern Africa. It seemed to me that there is a space in between those two, where you might be able to connect them, and that became a direction that I was drawn toward.

Then there are also chance events, I guess you might say. When I was looking for fieldwork sites for my dissertation, I was mostly looking at Zimbabwe and Mozambique. They were both post-liberation societies where the kinds of social transformations were underway that I was quite interested in. And my advisor said, 'Well, if you're going to scope out these sites in Southern Africa anyway, why don't you also go to Lesotho.' And I said, 'Well I'm not really interested in Lesotho'. And he said, 'Well, but it's a nice place and you won't get malaria because it's in the mountains and, you know, why don't you go there?' I ended up going. I brought reading along as one does when traveling and the book that I happened to have with me and was reading while I was in Lesotho was Michel Foucault's Discipline and Punish. So, on the one hand, I was sort of looking at all this stuff going on Lesotho – this swarm of development agencies and development experts – and on the other, I was asking myself these questions about what I was observing in Lesotho which came from reading Foucault at the same time. That led me to formulate a different kind of dissertation project than the one I had been thinking of. This eventually led to my book *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1990) and Foucault continued to be important for me at various stages in my academic work.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

First of all I am of course not an IR scholar nor would I claim any expertise in that area. As for "global" expertise, certainly there's a need for a certain kind of knowledge, for a certain kind of expertise, but I would think that in order to make better sense of our world in a global way, one also needs an expertise that is conditioned on a kind of humility if you like. It's not a matter of being qualified because you know so much.

In some ways, one of the main qualifications to do the work that I like my students to do is to be very aware of how <u>little</u> one knows. There's a kind of arrogance that comes with expertise sometimes. I remember Edward Said writing about all these Middle East experts. And he pointed out that most of them – he was talking about American experts – hadn't bothered to learn Arabic and couldn't read the daily newspaper in the country in which they were supposedly an expert. And I think this is sometimes an issue in political science. I remember hearing a – I won't give

you the name – but a very famous political scientist quoted as saying, 'Anytime I meet somebody who speaks the local language, I know they're second-rate.'

For me, that's shocking since I'd promote recognizing that your own knowledge, your own way of knowing, is one way of knowing among others in the world. And the question is then, what kind of relation are you going to forge between your way of knowing and other ways of knowing? And I would want my students to aspire to establishing – for want of a better word – a non-imperialistic relation between their own and other ways of knowing.

Is that why IR scholars/political scientists and anthropologically oriented scholars fail to communicate, even though they often study the same matter?

I think it is striking in many ways how differently political scientists and anthropologists will approach what looks like the same question. There's not much being written on that gap. James C. Scott is a figure who has done some bridging between the two disciplines. Timothy Mitchell would be another I think. But apart from that, and unfortunately, there hasn't been much explicit reflection, I think, on the gap between the political scientists who 'start from the top' and anthropologists who 'start from below'.

You seem to be at the forefront of a movement in anthropology that tries to overcome this gap. Increasingly, scholars like Anna Tsing, James C. Scott, and yourself try to link up international politics and the universals coming from there critically with local developments. And my question is: why is this only now happening?

There's actually quite a long history in anthropology of people doing work that links local developments with the international and the global scale, or with macro-level oriented disciplines such as politics and economics. I would think of the political economy tradition in anthropology, people like Sydney Mintz and Eric Wolf for instance. And on Zambia, where I've worked, there is a wonderful text that comes from 1941 by Godfrey Wilson (*An Essay on the Economics of Detribalization in Northern Rhodesia*) which traces the connection between the Great Depression and World War Two on the one hand, and things that are happening in Bemba villages in northern Zambia. So it *is* there.

On the other hand, I think it's true that there's a new kind of interest in trying to make those sorts of connections in the field. And my sense is that this is motivated by a dissatisfaction: the discipline has been trapped in this sort of valorization of the local, where you are really resting your authority and your academic legitimacy on knowledge of the local, and it was quite a disempowering kind of position for anthropology to occupy. It led to a sort of political impotence. And I think certainly that's one of the reasons why I've tried to change the scale at which I ask some of my questions.

In your latest book *Global Shadows* (2005), you speak about development organizations that 'are not states, but that are unquestionably state-like in some respects. … Local and global at the same time they are transnational … Not coincidentally, these organizations and movements that fall outside of the received scheme of analytic levels are also conspicuously under-studied'. In that sense, you challenge what traditional IR scholars would pose as their theoretical toolbox or their lens. So while you're only a building removed from an IR-realist such as Stephen Krasner (Theory Talk #21**) (you're both at Stanford), you seem to be universes apart. Are there, in your opinion, any shared focuses or challenges or any points where they might enter in a deeper discussion? In other words, what would it take to put a Kenneth Waltz and a James C. Scott – or perhaps not a Scott, but a Ferguson – at one table?**

One of the core differences seems to me to hinge on the status of the state. While I know little of IR as a scholarly discipline, from what I have seen the nation-state seems to serve as a fundamental analytical frame. Anthropology, by contrast, always starts with the idea that the nation state is one system of authority and organization among many others. Anthropology takes a long view, and throughout most of human history, human societies were not organized into nation-states. And even today there are other ways in which authority and power and legitimacy and regulation are organized in the world. The fact that we have nation-states now doesn't mean that there aren't other ways of organizing those things, or that other ways of organizing life are no longer important or no longer present.

So I think there's a tendency – in what I know of the IR world – to sort of take nation-states as the constitutive units of the world – to suppose that the world is fundamentally composed of nation-states. And I think anthropologists look at the world and see a much broader array of entities – nation-states are really just one of many, many kinds of claim-making and rule-making and authority-exercising schemes that exists in the world – and not always the most important.

So, to come back to your question, what it would take for an IR scholar and an anthropologist to share a table, I think it would be a sensibility towards the contingency of social organization, a willingness to open up the question of what one studies when one studies politics.

One important issue anthropologists face that challenge or address these bigger, 'traveling universals' as Anna Tsing would put it, is how to methodologically bridge that gap between remaining faithful to the in-depth case and engaging that with global discourses. How do you deal with that?

One question anthropologists are sometimes asked by other social scientists is: 'What's the point of all these cases unless we can make generalizations about them?' My starting point is rather different. I would follow Max Weber, and say, on the contrary: 'What's the point of generalizations unless they help us to understand what's right in front of us with these cases?' That is, generalizations are useful when they help us understand that which we encounter, which is always the particular, which is always the world that we live in.

Now I think this question of *generalities sometimes* gets confused with the question of *scale*. The confusion arises from the position that when you're talking about something big then that's general and if you're talking about something that's small, then that's particular.

But it is possible to think about the world as a unique case since there's only of them: 'N' equals one. How do we understand that unique case, which is the world that we live in? Here's where I think the question of scale comes up. We have to hazard interpretations and explanatory schemes that try to understand it as a whole. And it's for that reason that I've engaged with categories that would otherwise be dubious, like the category of Africa, for instance. It would be easy to pick that category apart and to show how really there's so much internal heterogeneity within this thing called 'Africa' that it doesn't make sense to talk about it as an 'it'. But if you're trying to understand questions such as: 'How is the world structured? What are the categories according to which people understand the world and ascribe value to different people and places within it?', then a category like 'Africa' becomes important. Not understood uncritically, but understood as a kind of native category that is a very powerful one in constituting a world.

The concept of 'development' is in many ways at the heart of your critiques. To ask a very naïve question perhaps, how can one criticize such a positive concept? Or, to put it more broadly, what's the use of 'critique'?

First of all, one would have to say that it's not always a positive concept. If you were having your land taken away from you so it could be given to some timber company in the name of 'development', you might not think it was so positive.

But I think it's also possible to answer the question in a slightly different way. Which is to start out by asking, 'Why would one suppose that critical thinking is only for things that one is opposed to?' For instance, I think it's crucially important that we think critically about the concept of 'human rights'. Does that mean that I'm in favor of torture and dictators? Certainly not. But the concept of human rights requires very careful, critical scrutiny, precisely because it is something around which we are organizing our political energies and where we're focusing our hopes and ambitions for the future. Which reminds me something Foucault said once in an interview, when he was accused of producing an impossibly pessimistic analysis. The interviewer said: 'You think everything is bad'. Foucault immediately responded by saying, 'No, No. I don't say that everything is *bad*. I say that everything is *dangerous*.' That's very different. Because when things are dangerous, we have to watch them closely. We have to attend to them. We have to see what are they doing. Where are they leading us astray? Where are the dangers?

And I think one wants to approach the things that we value (politically or socially) in that kind of spirit: being attentive to the way that they can lead us astray, to the way that we can end up producing effects that are not the ones that we had in mind. An exemplary account of this, in my view, is the analysis of human rights is a book by Harri Englund, called *Prisoners of Freedom* (2006, read first chapter here in pdf), which brings just that kind of skeptical scrutiny to bear on the concept of human rights in the effect it actually has. Which is far from being an attack on the idea of human rights. It is, rather, the sort of careful, critical scrutiny that I have in mind.

Throughout your work, one could say you take a stand in a debate in which Marxists are also engaged and that is the debate concerning the effects or nature of structural international power/economic relationships, 'working upon' countries in Africa. What are the limits of a Marxist approach to this problematique?

I think a lot of the Marxist work is quite important in understanding the outlines of the global political economy. Some of the work done by geographers in particular is, I think, really essential. I do, however, see some limits in its application, and I'll give a concrete example from what I'm working on now.

In Africa, we're witnessing the emergence of these huge poor urban populations that are not employed in wage labor in the usual sense of the term. Increasingly, these people are less and less connected to land as well. Now Marxist approaches tend to valorize the emergence of the proletariat and to see the fundamental relation as based on exploitation by the extraction of surplus value via the labor-capital relation. The story would make sense from a Marxist view as follows: capitalism needs to expand, pushes people off their traditional land as farmers or nomads and pushes them into the cities as cheap labor. My problem is to make sense of these incredible amounts of people who aren't really exploited in that sense. Their predicament is that they are not even worth exploiting. Nobody wants to come and exploit their labor power by setting up factories and turning them into workers.

Now, a Marxist could say: 'this is already in Marx, Marx identified the problem of the *Lumpen* – the '*Lumpenproletariat*'. But for Marx, the *Lumpenproletariat* was a marginal and really kind of despicable thing and I just don't think that will do for understanding this situation in contemporary African cities where what Marx might have called the *Lumpen* constitutes, in some places, the majority of the population. So therefore we need new analytical tools, tools that go beyond what traditional Marxism has to offer.

You are famous for the exploration of the 'depoliticization' of poverty and development in your book '*the Anti-Politics Machine*' (1990). You continue on the disconnection of modernity and growth in '*Global Shadows*'. Is that an argument for the *re*politicization of poverty and growth? In that context, are such terms as 'ownership' and 'decentralization' potential international 'repoliticizers' of poverty?

I'm all in favor of politicizing these questions in the sense of presenting them in such a way as to foreground the relations of power that they are constitutive of. I don't think you can, as you put it, repoliticize things just by switching terms though. One of the things we've learned is that terms can be used in all sorts of ways.

Take a term like 'empowerment', which originally came out of social movements and was very much a way of addressing poverty as a question of powerlessness. This term was quickly

appropriated by mainstream development politics and made into a depoliticized, technical term that has now been emptied of almost all content.

What I think is important is to try to insist on a frame in which things like poverty are *relational* rather than a matter of a group of people who lack certain things. I think the key to understand critically such terms that are in vogue in development, is to understand them as a way in which groups are brought into social relations with each other. Some of the South African activists I'm talking with now say, 'We've heard enough about 'poverty alleviation'. What about wealth alleviation?' That's a move that insists on saying, 'We're not just talking about the poor and what's wrong with the poor and why are the poor such a problem and what are we going to do with the poor'. It's rather a question of, 'What is our relationship with our fellow members of society?' And I think that kind of move is more than just a shift in terms.

Within the global governance approach to development, there has been a wider shift toward the use of terms such as 'responsibilization', 'decentralization', 'privatization', and 'local ownership', as for instance reflected in core documents like the Paris Declaration**. These kinds of terms indicate a different relationship between donor and receiver in which membership roles are altered in some kind of way. What does this do to what you have dubbed 'the development machine'?**

I should say I've not worked on these questions of development projects for many, many years and I'm not well-informed on what the latest wrinkles are in the development industry. I am, however, skeptical that things are terribly different from the way they were when I first started working on these issues. As your question seems to indicate, the development industry has trotted out new languages and new justifications to explain that *now* things are going to be done fundamentally differently. I can tell you that is what was being said in the late 1970s too, when they were doing all these "integrated rural development" projects all over Africa. Their slogan then was 'popular participation'. And they said, 'We now understand that development can't be a top-down thing, it has to involve the buy-in from the local people and that we're going to do it this way'.

So there is a kind of circularity to these things. While the terms might be different, the same kind of realizations or processes often seem to sustain the same kind of relationships, between essentially the same donors (as donors) and the same population to be developed (as receivers).

With that said, I think one does have to go into this with an open mind and be ready to find that maybe there are new things under the sun. There *are* innovations, and interesting new kinds of politics *are* emerging. That's the kind of open-minded sensibility and curiosity that I was talking about at the beginning.

One question I would like to ask you with regards to the use of Foucault in understanding and framing issues, one problem with which many contemporary critics of governmentality studies **seem to struggle is the question of** *agency*. **A lot of phrases used by**

Foucauldians or governmentality students tend to adopt the passive mode, making the acting discourses into faceless entities. So, in that way, governmentality studies is also a way of reducing agency and keeping forces that work upon the local kind of anonymous and *faceless* forces. How do you deal with this?

Well, when I was doing my work on development in *The Anti-Politics Machine*, I was not actually engaging with Foucault's idea of governmentality. It's true, I do use the word in one chapter of the book, but I use it in a very different way than Foucault did, and it's a usage that actually goes back to Roland Barthes. So, that work was not about governmentality although I have engaged with the concept in some of my later work. What was really important for me at that stage from Foucault was his approach to understanding discourse.

And there, I think the problem of agency, as you put it, is often misposed. Foucault always insisted that discourse is a practice, that there is no opposition between discourse and practice. To engage in a discourse is to do something, to perform an action. Somebody sitting and typing a report is doing something. It's a form of social action. It's a form of practice. And so understood in that way, it's not a question of some anonymous discourse sort of making things happen, it is a question of one set of practices, let's say the practices of thinking though things, which is articulated with another set of practices, let's say being a development worker. So the practices of the people who are constructing a country in a particular way, or who are formulating the problem of poverty in a particular way, they're not just moving some ink on a piece of paper; they're doing something in the world. And their practices are articulated with the practices of other people, which is why in my book I go from talking about 'discursive apparatuses' immediately to talking about 'institutional apparatuses'. I go from describing what are people doing in a World Bank report to talking about what people are doing with cows in the villages. For me, they're the same kind of activity.

In your work (explicitly, for instance, in '*Global Shadows*') you struggle with the concept of modernity. It seems to be an at least problematic concept for anthropologists: it both captures a historical promise and a criterion of differentiation that in a way (also historically) constitutes the very subject of anthropology. How 'modern' are you?

I've argued that the concept of modernity is analytically incoherent. It's not a useful analytical category. So while I don't think it makes sense to ask, 'Is this person more modern than that person?', I've also tried to say you can't just end it there. You just can't say, 'This is a category that doesn't really makes sense and let's not use it', because, as an ethnographer, you have to listen to and take seriously the categories you encounter in the thought and practices of people you're working with. And that's where I encountered the concept of modernity in a way that I can't just dismiss. It is a very powerful 'folk category', as anthropologists like to say. I can bring it into my analysis in a very critical way, but it remains a concept that people use to make sense of their own lives, to make certain identity claims, to give voice to certain kinds of aspirations they have for their lives. And In that sense, one has to take it very seriously. It's one of the discussions within which very important kinds of political, cultural, social claims are being made.

I could compare it to the concept of 'race'. Back in the mid- to late twentieth century, anthropologists decided that the concept of race really didn't make any sense; that there's no such thing as 'race' in a biological sense -- that there are a range of interesting minor biological differences in human populations but they don't fall out into things called 'races'. So, scientifically we should just dispense with the term.

But we also soon found out that that wasn't good enough. You couldn't just dispense with the term 'race' because we live in a world where racial categories have tremendous force. And to simply say 'race doesn't exist' doesn't get you very far in understanding racism or understanding the racially structured labor market or what have you.

I treat 'modernity' in the same kind of spirit: it is something that is part of our world that we have to be able to grapple with and analyze without swallowing it whole; retaining our scientific skepticism about its adequacy as a concept while also understanding that it's doing important things in the world that we must attend to.

The solution to the failure of development cooperation is always development cooperation – do you see a different (brighter) future? Is there a task for development studies? Or could – and should – it be replaced by some different approach in bettering people's lives?

You've really asked two questions. One is about the future of, as you called it, development cooperation. And your question of course recalls Foucault's insistence that in our world the solution to the problem of the prison is always the prison. I think it's true that development has shown the same tendency. And yet -- while I'm not in the business of trying to foretell the future -- I do think that one should be open to new developments, as I said, to be ready to be surprised. It may look like it's the same old thing out there, but people are inventive. And I think there's a lot of interesting, innovative politics that takes place, sometimes in some surprising places. So I would like to approach this a sense of 'We don't know the answer to this question.' We should therefore be open and be able to see what's happening right in front of us. What's happening right under our eyes might be more interesting than we think.

The other question is about this formation called development studies, which I have always had an ambivalent relation to. I've always mistrusted the term 'development' – I diligently put it in quotes through an entire book for that reason. I prefer formulations that foreground questions of power and inequality. So I think if you can find ways of turning conversations about development into conversations about things like global inequality or global justice, that's often an improvement. At the same time, development studies is an institutional site within which very good work has often been done. And I think it's certainly the case that what Arturo Escobar called 'the development encounter' (anthropologists working in development) is something that needs to be studied – it demands our scholarly attention. Insofar as development studies programs are sites where a whole range of encounters that take place in and around programs of "development" can be explored in a thoughtful and critical way, then it should certainly be supported.

Last question. What are you working on right now and what is some exciting stuff that is happening out there and which you are following with a keen interest?

I'm interested now in questions of social policy and persistent poverty in southern Africa, particularly. And one of the things that interest me is this strange coexistence of neoliberal economic restructuring with what we thought was its opposite, which is the welfare state. South Africa, for instance, has a quite elaborate system of social grants and pensions, which has been actually expanded in recent years, and it is becoming more and more important as a way both of providing subsistence for people in South Africa and as a kind of technique of government. So I'm interested in the emergence in new kinds of welfarism, if you like.

Simultaneously, one can witness the increasingly important phenomenon of governments in international agencies responding to problems of poverty with a new willingness to dispense what are called 'cash transfers'. That's one of those things that is new under the sun. There's a new willingness to say, 'Well, what poor people really need is some money'. If I would have told people that twenty-five years ago, they would have laughed me out of the house. Imagine the response if I had come into the World Bank and I said, 'The problem is that poor people don't have enough money; you should give them some'… Well, now the World Bank is pushing for what they call 'conditional cash transfers'; they're looking at places like Brazil that have done this (largely places in Latin America but not only there), and they're saying, 'Actually, we've got some anti-poverty programs here that are showing very impressive results and they're based on giving money'. So, yeah, I'm trying to understand why is that thinkable now when it wasn't thinkable twenty years ago. What has changed? How has that common-sense understanding changed under our eyes?

I think it's partly about labor. For so long, there was this sort of terror of undermining the incentive to work, because what you needed to do was to get poor people (and this holds particularly in South Africa), and force them to work. Get them off their land and get them into the mine. Get them into the wage labor market so that their wage labor could be exploited and put to work. And we're now looking at a world where there are loads of people willing to be exploited: there are actually loads of people willing to offer their labor yet there are no takers. So I think one of the things that may be going on is that poverty technocrats are starting to say, 'Well, maybe undermining the motive to work is not such a problem because we don't have jobs for these people anyway'. That's one of the things I'm thinking about at least.

Professor Ferguson's research has been conducted in Lesotho and Zambia, and has engaged a broad range of theoretical and ethnographic issues. A central theme running through it has been a concern with the political, broadly conceived, and with the relation between specific social and cultural processes and the abstract narratives of "development" and "modernization" through which such processes have so often been known and understood. Ferguson's most recent book, Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order, was published by Duke University Press in 2006. The essays

that make up the book address a range of specific topics, ranging from structural adjustment, the crisis of the state, and the emergence of new forms of government-via-NGO, to the question of the changing social meaning of "modernity" for colonial and postcolonial urban Africans. They converge, however, around the question of "Africa" as a place in a wider categorical ordering of the world, and they use this question as a way to think about such large-scale issues as globalization, modernity, worldwide inequality, and social justice. He is now beginning a new research project in South Africa, exploring the emergence of new problematics of poverty and social policy under conditions of neoliberalism.

Related links

- Ferguson's faculty profile at Stanford

- Read Ferguson's '*Of Mimicry and Membership: Africans and the "New World Society'* (Cultural Anthropology, 2002, and reprinted as a chapter in 'Global Shadows') here (pdf)
- Read Ferguson and Gupta's '*Spatializing States: Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality*' (2002, American Ethnologist) here (pdf)