

THE IRONIES OF DEVELOPMENT

Review of James Ferguson *The Anti-Politics Machine: 'Development, depoliticization and bureaucratic state power in Lesotho'* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990)

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James Ferguson is an American anthropologist who earned his PhD at Harvard for a thesis characterising critically the rural development 'industry' which he has now turned into a sharp and very relevant book. There are three reasons why this book should be read widely in South Africa. First, it has quite a lot to say about state and society in neighbouring Lesotho, although this review will not primarily concentrate on that aspect of the book. The end of South Africa's international isolation will greatly intensify contact with our underdeveloped and largely rural African neighbours. Second, rural development work in South Africa will become more and more part of public discourse given the emphasis on land reform placed by ANC spokesmen. Third, and probably of the greatest importance, what Ferguson says about rural development could easily and accurately apply to other forms of development projects that get more attention in South Africa now, such as education or housing.

Ferguson's basic premise is that we must not evaluate the burgeoning community of development specialists in their own terms but rather in terms of their actual impact (or lack thereof). He divides almost all the development literature into two: literature from within the 'industry', covering a wide political spectrum but never questioning its basic assumptions, and critical literature which assumes that the whole structure is a plot aimed at furthering the interests of capital. This critique, often centred around dependency (and even the conservative end of the development industry in Lesotho is aimed in a so-far quixotic effort to reduce dependency on South Africa) and self-confessedly neo-Marxist, often misses the point that most development projects do not actually *succeed* at aiding capitalism at all. Many development experts welcome radical criticism as long as it contains the promise of new, if ostensibly radicalised, development projects.

Some of Ferguson's principal points ring very true. Consider the following:

- 1) Development projects in Africa are almost invariably miserable failures yet they continue on and on. In a retrospective look at the expensive Canadian project in Lesotho which forms Ferguson's case study, a top official surges with pride at being able to claim that it was actually 'not an

unmitigated disaster.'

2)The rural development industry places a very one-sided emphasis on expanding cash crop production for the market even in as unlikely a setting for a Green Revolution as overpopulated, arid, windswept highland Lesotho.

3)It is crucial in the development business to describe every so-called LDC (less developed country) in terms that are interchangeable with any other - Nepal, Paraguay or Trinidad and Tobago - as the case may be. Ferguson shows convincingly that virtually all aid assessments in Lesotho are based on sociological and historical analyses that would sound ridiculous to any undergraduate familiar with standard work of any ideology on the subject. Such assessments assume Lesotho to be a country of peasants with limited knowledge of the market, in need of roads and the like to bring civilisation closer to them. If only agriculture defined as being in 'crisis' could be made more attractive, migrant labour and 'dependence' would fade away. The *real* Lesotho is a country long in intensive contact with the market, in which able-bodied men virtually all migrate across the border to make a living and agricultural activity is rather marginal, producing roughly 6% of GNP. There is no prospect whatsoever that the Basotho will all turn back to peasant life as it was in fact lived at the turn of this century or that it could provide them with a comfortable standard of living.

4)Rather like a dispirited football team, it is often assumed by development experts that the Basotho only need a peppier attitude to succeed as modernizers. It is clearly true that Sotho values need to be explored in order to explain Sotho social and economic structures but that is because we need to uncover their deeply-felt economic logic.

5)Finally, the assumption invariably made is that development potentially 'benefits' a country/people called, for instance, 'Lesotho' rather than looking critically from the start at social forces, such as the small greedy cliques that may control the state, which are actually most relevant. It is therefore an ideology of deliberate *depoliticisation*. From this follows the dangerous corollary that states are invariably effective and development occurs largely or entirely in response to government planning. The fallacies in these assumptions are self-evident once pointed out by Ferguson.

Ferguson looks in detail at the Thaba-Tseka Project which originated in 1975 as a livestock and 'range management' scheme. In its heyday around 1980, it became a very expensive and complex 'integrated rural development' project aimed at services, infrastructure, agriculture and rural government as well. Tied to the project was the creation of a new tenth administrative district by the Lesotho government. It is very difficult to discover any mitigating circumstan-

ces that would allow any positive assessment of the project by the time it wound down in the early 1980s. The grander schemes had already been liquidated to be replaced by a conventional stress on agriculture, an abandonment of the pleasant discourse of 'popular participation' that had become fashionable for a few years and a retreat from an earlier focus on administrative decentralisation that had potentially threatened the writ of central government.

Ferguson brings to bear all the fallacies that he has exposed with such wit in early chapters in explaining the characteristic failure of Thaba-Tseka, one of the bigger amongst more than 200 such development projects so far in Lesotho. The arrival of better roads in this area served to bring consumer goods into the district more cheaply rather than to encourage exports. This new prosperity depended entirely on contemporary increases in South African mine wages. The whole logic of the project was to encourage the commercialisation of cattle transactions. Ferguson argues that although male Basotho sell cattle, they do so out of despair in conditions of poverty. In general, they continue to resist using cattle as means of cash accumulation. The ownership of cattle has a different, non-capitalist economic logic involved with community security and prestige, often much resented by the owners' wives who see the retention of too many beasts, especially those in poor conditions, as a source of misery for their families. 'Non-commercial attitudes towards stock-keeping and an anti-market ethic where livestock are concerned are important parts of the local economic system, rooted in the network of local power relations generated in a labour reserve economy' (p 179). The lure of the market changed this very little in Thaba-Tseka.

Economic innovation associated with the integrated phase of the project was no more acceptable. Attempts to improve horse stocks, grazing land or grow trees for firewood met with disaster when they alienated some people's access to land. The Lesotho state was really interested in Thaba-Tseka as part of an effort to extend its net more widely into the countryside. The last thing it would want would be successful capitalist rural development that would create modern structures in the countryside, destabilise the population and drive the mass of rural dwellers to unemployment, despair and anti-social or radical activity in town. Indeed, identification of the project with Maseru politicians was itself the cause of successful resistance to development activities on the part of the supposed beneficiaries.

In one sense, which Ferguson considers to be the unintended and unwritten real effect of development, the scheme did work. Development, the 'anti-politics machine' which defines itself in such a way as to mask the political, actually contained a deeply political end, the only end which was in fact achieved, the deeper intrusion of the state into the countryside. Ferguson is impressed by the

argument of Bob Shenton and Piotr Dutkiewicz that development is best understood as a facet of this process which they call 'etatization'. This is the unspoken and real interest of the authorities in such projects. One thing that the government was able to do was to scotch the decentralisation aspect of Thaba-Tseka and use the project input to establish the new district administration more firmly.

The 'etatization' hypothesis is fertile but remains somewhat unproven. Perhaps the least successful part of this book is an epilogue in which Ferguson tries to consider what those engaged in the problematic of development should be doing. He suggests engagement (support for the NUM, support for sanctions against South Africa to force political change there) with what he calls counter-hegemonic forces but it seems to me that this is not entirely clear or satisfying. How do you evaluate what is counter-hegemonic and what is useful? Why should a government such as that in Lesotho permit activity it sees as subversive in any way? Ferguson is strongest in illustrating how good research that actually explores people's motives in depth and comes to grips with the real power relationships behind social structures at least illuminates the dilemma in which so many Africans find themselves. With economy and clarity, he sums up powerfully the most basic things we need to know about this exploited society.