

Interview with James (Jim) Ferguson conducted by Fernando Rabossi and Roberto Kant de Lima in Niterói, Rio de Janeiro¹

Entrevista com James Ferguson (Jim) realizada por Fernando Rabossi e Roberto Kant de Lima em Niterói, Rio de Janeiro

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ABSTRACT

In 2010, James Ferguson visited Brazil at the invitation of the Instituto Nacional de Ciência e Tecnologia – Instituto de Estudos Comparados em Administração Institucional de Conflitos, coordinated by Roberto Kant de Lima, a professor in the Programa de Pós-graduação em Antropologia at Universidade Federal Fluminense. During his visit, Ferguson delivered a lecture at the 34th Annual Meeting of the Associação Nacional de Pós-graduação em Ciências Sociais and visited the Universidade Federal Fluminense in Niterói. On Itaipú Beach, also in Niterói, he was interviewed by anthropologists Roberto Kant de Lima and Fernando Rabossi, from Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. This interview was published in issue 30 of *Antropolítica: Journal of Contemporary Anthropology*, in 2011. In volume 57, issue 2, which pays tribute to James Ferguson on the solemn occasion of his passing on February 12, 2025, we are republishing the interview in both Portuguese and English. This serves not only to honor his legacy but also to revisit significant themes in anthropological theory. James Ferguson was an American anthropologist, trained in Social Anthropology at Harvard University. His work is widely recognized in the fields of economic and political anthropology, the anthropology of development, and anthropological theory. All these themes are addressed in this interview, which we hope provides a glimpse into key aspects of Ferguson's career.

Keywords: James Ferguson, Development Anthropology, Anthropological Theory, Trajectory.

¹ This text is a translation from Brazilian Portuguese into English, by Jeffrey Hoff, of an oral interview conducted originally in English. The original translation into Brazilian Portuguese was from Izabel Nuñez. We could not recuperate the original English recording, from 15 years ago. Roberto Kant de Lima provided a technical review.

RESUMO

No ano de 2010, James Ferguson visitou o Brasil a convite do Instituto Nacional de Ciência e Tecnologia – Instituto de Estudos Comparados em Administração Institucional de Conflitos, coordenado por Roberto Kant de Lima, professor do Programa de Pós-graduação em Antropologia da Universidade Federal Fluminense, quando proferiu uma palestra no 34º Encontro Anual da Associação Nacional de Pós-graduação em Ciências Sociais. Nessa mesma visita, visitou a Universidade Federal Fluminense em Niterói. Na praia de Itaipú, concedeu uma entrevista aos antropólogos Roberto Kant de Lima e Fernando Rabossi, vinculado à Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, publicada no número 30 da Antropolítica, Revista Contemporânea de Antropologia, em 2011. No contexto do volume 57, número 2, que homenageia James Ferguson, na triste ocasião do seu falecimento no dia 12 de fevereiro de 2025, republicamos a entrevista em português e em inglês para, além de prestar homenagem, recuperar temas importantes da teoria antropológica. James Ferguson foi um antropólogo norte-americano, formado em Antropologia Social na Harvard University, cuja obra é amplamente reconhecida no campo da antropologia econômica e política, na Antropologia do Desenvolvimento e na teoria antropológica de forma mais geral. Todos esses temas são abordados nesta conversa, que esperamos poder recuperar um pouco do que foi a trajetória de James Ferguson.

Palavras-chave: James Ferguson, Antropologia do Desenvolvimento, Teoria Antropológica, Trajetória.

Fernando Rabossi: We're going to do an interview about James Ferguson's trajectory. The other day you gave us the script for this interview at UFF, so I'm going to take up some things you presented. First we'll try to recall your history and then I'll ask you some more specific questions. It's very good to be here with Kant, because he has a relation to your trajectory. How did you get to Africa? How did you choose Africa? Why Africa?

James Ferguson: I think that first I chose anthropology. When I left for the university, I had no idea about anthropology, it wasn't a very well-known discipline in the United States, and I discovered in a course during my undergraduate studies that anthropology was very interesting to me, that the study of other societies was something very interesting. I was at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and there were great scholars of Africa. Paul Bohannan was one, and David Brokensha was the other. So I learned about anthropology and became interested. I began with African anthropology and decided to do my undergraduate degree in anthropology. At that time, when I needed a focus area, it seemed natural to me that it should be African anthropology, because it was the type of anthropology I was trained in. I think I was also interested in and

attracted to the political struggles that were taking place in Southern Africa, particularly at that time. It was a time of movements celebrating the break-up of the Portuguese empire in countries like Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, where political struggles were taking place. So there were a lot of interesting political questions and a lot of idealistic notions of how a free society would be, what kind of reconstruction would follow when the nationals took power and, since I was a middle-class radical type, I was driven to try and understand this scenario.

FR: Why did you decide to live in Southern Africa to do your research?

JF: It was the time of apartheid and it wasn't possible to do research in South Africa in the way I would have liked to, coming as a foreigner. Some people were doing research in South Africa but it was very difficult, and quite often they found themselves in trouble with the authorities, some even lost their lives. It was a very repressive time for anthropological research. And I'm sure that, if I wanted to, I wouldn't have given in to the prohibitions, so it didn't even seem like a possibility.

FR: How did you get into Harvard? Why did you choose Harvard? For the professors?

JF: At the time, I actually knew very little about the graduate programs. And I'm surprised by students today who seem to know everything about the programs they're applying to, their lines, whether they offer professionalization or not.

FR: The internet allows that.

JF: Yes, I think that's part of it, too. I was much less focused at the time. I was encouraged to do my degree by some professors, who suggested some programs.

FR: Paul? Paul Bohannan? Was he part of a group of Africanist [anthropologists]?

JF: Yes, yes. And David Brokensha in particular. In fact, the most important Africanist for me was Sally Falk Moore, who only got there [to Harvard] after me. She arrived after I was studying at Harvard for two years, and it became a great place to do anthropology, but when I applied to study there, it wasn't an Africanist-focused program. And I almost went to Columbia [University] because I liked the idea of being in New York. In the end, I was convinced that it would be better to go to Harvard, but when I did, I wasn't sure about the program.

FR: And how did you wind up in Lesotho?

JF: Well, as I said, my interest was really in the liberation movements and the social process that was taking place in Africa. I wanted to go to Zimbabwe or Mozambique, that's what I was thinking about. My advisor at the time, anthropologist Sally Falk Moore, said: why don't you go to Lesotho? I'm going in the summer, and you can have a look and see what you think. I thought it was strange and said I didn't want to go to Lesotho, because it didn't interest me, it wasn't what I wanted to do. And she said: yes, but you probably won't get into Mozambique, and Lesotho is a good place, the people are friendly, it's in the mountains, and you won't get malaria. I had to listen to her and I went. Thanks to Roberto Kant [de Lima], I took a book to read while I was traveling, which was one of the things on my reading list: Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, which I hadn't read, but still had to. And I read it while I was in Lesotho. So I was thinking about Foucault while I was there, with all those radical questions that the book raises and at the same time encountering, for the first time, what I later came to call the development industry, this extraordinary promise of development agencies. We went down to Lesotho, I think because the agencies wanted to be in Southern Africa, but not in South Africa. Lesotho was a kind of safe, uncontroversial place where you could carry out your research program in peace. There were all these development agencies, research programs and people driving around, lots of *Land Rovers*.

FR: Was the agency that took you there Canadian?

JF: I ended up studying the Canadian projects, but there were many others. I remember there was a Taiwanese project in which they were teaching the locals how to plant rice. Down the road, there was a project from Ireland which taught the locals how to plant potatoes. It was extraordinary, and I tried to understand it all. I had a background in Marxist political economy, which was a very strong tradition in Southern Africa at the time, but there was no good Marxist explanation for what was happening, for what people were doing, for what they were trying to do, to understand the logic of these development projects, carried out one after the other, after the other, after the other... in this small and not so important country.

FR: Something I find in your words, which are very inspiring, is productivity, one of the things you explore in your book.

JF: Yes, yes, a lot of my discussion, particularly about development projects, is related to success indicators, the projects themselves, the objectives to be achieved and how all this is

evaluated.

FR: Can we say the same about politics?

JF: Yes, that's right. It's not working the way they expect it to and so the question is: if the projects are failing, why is this happening? What is the diagnosis? Or, if they need to be improved, how can they be improved? They didn't seem like very interesting questions in Lesotho, because there it was obvious that they were failing. And it was even more obvious that they were going to fail and that they were organized in such a way that they couldn't even exist. It was already clear to me that they weren't doing anything, that they were occupying that place for other reasons and producing social effects, which was very important. And, as I said, the anthropological approach said: let's first find out what's going on here. If you see someone dancing to make it rain, you don't say "let's see if this is really going to make it rain and how we can change the dance to make it rain more." Rather you start by asking yourself: what are they doing here? Why are they doing this? What are their explanations for it? How does it make sense to them? What social effects does it have? Because simply having a ceremony to bring rain says nothing, has no social effect and doesn't produce certain social consequences, but it is the key to understanding and developing what is happening and what is important. And so I found a kind of *anthropological agnosticism*, which I call being too believing, having too much faith, in development projects.

FR: We've had this concept since the 1990s, but how was the reception to your work at the time?

JF: It's hard to say, but I think it ended up having a much wider reception than I expected.

FR: Your book was one of the first to tackle the issue of development from an anthropological perspective.

JF: My impression is that I was very much ignored by people who studied development and who worked in development. I had a student who went to Lesotho, five or seven years after the book was published, and asked people who worked in development agencies there what they thought of the book, and nobody had even heard of it. So that was my first impression, that there was a kind of reception in the academy, but it had no impact outside it. Then I found out that it actually circulated more widely than I realized, not in official development agencies, but much more in the advocacy world and in groups of people who were doing this kind of work. It

was surprising because it's a book about a specific time and place, and many people seemed to recognize similar things in the analyses of their own situation.

Roberto Kant: Good ethnography is called good ethnography.

JF: But I think that, rather than making generalizations and saying “this is how it happens all over the world, believe me because I said so,” I'd rather say “this is what I'm finding here, see if you can apply it to your situation” and that way, maybe, you'll find some things to which it applies, and not others. But to create generalizations, it's a more inductive process, it will be a generalization if you arrive at the result by the output of hundreds of different researchers who have used the ideas and tried them in their fields and found: ah, there's an *anti-political machine* here too and it works in different ways. That's why I think there's a kind of survival of this work, in a way that was surprising to me.

FR: Why the anti-political machine? Can you explain the main idea behind the concept?

JF: Yes, what I was observing was the way in which various issues, which didn't seem political, such as who earns what, why some people are rich and others are poor and why some people own so much land, were translated into another register, I would say, where they appeared more related to capital, far removed from cultural development and cultural productivity. “Maybe we don't have fertilizers...” yes, maybe we don't, but there was a more important type of formulation, there were many more struggles to know who has the power and who doesn't, and who has resources and who doesn't. And I could see very well what was happening with the discourse and practice of development. I was following the difficulties and disadvantages experienced by poor and emerging people and rewriting it in a less harsh way, in a way that is amendable, apolitical and technical. And what I had in mind with the *anti-political machine* analogy was a figure I know from science fiction, the idea of a gravity machine, that you can create some machine, turn it on and then gravity no longer exists and everyone can be light. I thought they wanted to create a similar machine that would remove politics from people's lives and take away all these political themes. People later imagined that this was something related to illusionism, that I was talking about machines of desire and so on. And actually I didn't have that in mind, I'd read some books about science fiction, but that wasn't my idea.

FR: After your last book was published, working with [the concept of] the anti-political machine, you discussed broad issues in Africa. Thinking back to Paul Bohannan, your professor, was there some kind of change in your fieldwork? From the interactions in the field and, for

example, the analysis of the World Bank? It's an innovative type of combination; you joined two things that were not so common [in the analysis about] Africa. What was the reaction from your [dissertation] committee?

JF: This would require a discussion about strategies...

RK: At that time I was worried about my dissertation committee, and I had good reasons for that. In any case, when I went to his house [JF], and we were talking, he had to register, make one file for the PhD dissertation to write and another for the book. I didn't really understand why he was going to all this trouble, creating two files. I was curious about this, because of my book on "the anthropology of academy; when we are the Indians," and then he said: I'm doing this because, you know, I have one file... no, this one is for the committee, and this one is for... and I said: ah, now I get it! Yes... The file was OK, but when the editors say here that they don't publish theses, they publish books, it's only because theses have, as you know, a literature review, which books don't have. What they say doesn't always make sense here, because sometimes theses can be published exactly as they are. We often have this problem here, but in the United States they have a very clear notion of genres, literary genres. So, what is an article, a chapter, a book, a thesis, a monograph, a paper is strict, it has to follow formal adjustments, which was discussed now at Anpocs, when I spoke about it... but what I'm saying is that what you asked has to be put into perspective, because you write a thesis for the committee, and you write a book for your public, not for your public, but for the audience you're looking for. The audience you hope to have. It's not the committee. They're different recipients. Because in the United States you write a lot for the public, not for yourself. In Brazil you normally write for yourself, and you want to be approved, loved, emulated and everything else. If that doesn't happen, you get down on yourself. Not there, it's one thing for the judges to judge you, it's another for the public and the newspapers to judge you. You [Americans] have a lot of agencies. Forgive me for interrupting, but your question has to be put into perspective. It seems like you just get there and present the book... and it's not like that in the United States.

JF: Well, one of the members of my committee said that I had to explain my plans for the work I wanted to write and that it seemed to be a book that you write at the end of your career, not at the beginning. The idea seemed to be that of a senior researcher, of researchers at more advanced stages. It wasn't a study of communities, and that was the idea of American anthropology for a long time; for it to be a real ethnography, a real anthropology, you had to go to the location, live in some communities for a long time and then come back. And yes, of course there are broad connections, and you have to think historically, politically and economically, but it has to be

politically and economically in that location, and I never conceived of my project as a study of communities. There was a village, where I stayed for a while, as part of the study, but my study was always about something bigger, called the development industry and what relates to that. So I spent a lot of time talking, not to the people who live in the communities, but to people who work with development and others in Canada. I spent a lot of time doing discourse analysis, which is not common for anthropologists, looking at World Bank documents and trying to understand what sounded strange, but the framework didn't look strange. What appeared were the presuppositions and rules present in the discourse, things you have to say because they make sense. I was working at different levels, I wasn't studying communities in the traditional manner. But many community issues appeared, and the first time I presented my work to look for a job it was very clear that I should present the part of the book that presents practices of maintaining local capital, and I had a whole study on why people maintained capital in the way they did and how this was related to the sale of what was produced. Everything was related to the maintenance of capital, and my supervisors made it very clear that I shouldn't present a Foucauldian analysis of World Bank documents, which in a way was more interesting, not as something anthropological, because it wouldn't have accredited me as a true anthropologist who understands people, so, yes, what happened in that job interview was a mistake, for example. So that gives you an idea of the kind of pressure we were negotiating.

RK: And also the strategies that Americans use to look for jobs, exactly as this story sounds, because there is an adaptation, and it's different from Brazil, where there are competitions with vacancies to be filled and you take tests for the open vacancies. There [in the USA] you create a profile and adapt it to the profile the market is looking for. And then you choose from your academic work what will be of interest, which is exactly what Jim did. He adapted his work according to the profile of the job vacancy that the anthropology department or any other wanted.

JF: You strategically choose which part of you will be shown.

RK: It's different from here, where you want to show all your work.

FR: Returning to the question of the anti-political machine, there are the remnants of tradition, of the locals.

FR: What about local logic?

JF: Local logic wasn't the focus of my ethnographic exercise, but sometimes it had to be addressed because these projects came with the idea that they knew how people would behave and how they could keep local businesses alive. But it wasn't profitable and so they had to introduce changes to find more income for people, which was just common sense, but of course it was linked to all the theory about what people were doing and why they were doing it. They assumed that people would maintain their business and understand the losses in profits if they were provided with means to reduce losses. All in all, they didn't understand why the projects didn't produce the effects they wanted. And I had to give an alternative explanation as to why people continued to have no income, what the point was, and so I ended up involved with capital maintenance, which was not a business, but a way in which workers who were employed in South Africa could think about saving their income and have some economic access. And they did it in a way that the capital was protected, expanded and important to their independence. It is essential to note that this is not a traditional, centuries-old logic that is continued throughout the African tradition. But it is a later system that emerged between the 1960s and 1970s. It is an invented tradition, if you like. The use of the idea of an African tradition in the service of certain interests, liberal interests, formed a kind of big business about tradition in Lesotho. But the tradition there is that cattle are not a kind of property that you fatten up and sell for different reasons, so it's quite complex and works very differently from the way the "developmentalists" imagined it. The result was that people didn't want to sell the cattle and understood that they should keep them as a way of doing business; for them having the cattle didn't mean selling them, which got them nowhere because they didn't respond to the investments of the cattle owners. So they should keep the cattle for when they really needed them, when they were going to eat them or use them in the future.

FR: This is something similar to what happens in situations where selling is like producing another type of person in the market.

JF: Yes, that's a very common idea among the peoples of Africa, where cattle are not seen as a type of property and have to be treated differently. They say that cattle are complex and there is a whole literature on the subject. What I was trying to do, then, was to show that when people refuse to sell cattle, it's not necessarily related to the reasons of the agents themselves, but to the logic of past African culture which appears to be custom. But in fact there are many other different reasons, different interests, that motivate and sustain this.

FR: The question is that in a way I have the same feeling about Zâmbia, where it's something similar to tradition, but on the other hand it's not just as tradition says it is.

JF: I think that for a long time anthropology in southern Africa was divided. On the one hand saying that traditional Africa was still alive, and on the other that Africa was modernized. It took us a long time to realize that. And what I was finding was a situation that had little in common with this construction of traditional Africa, of people living in remote places for generations and generations, disconnected from the conditions of modern industrial life, which didn't apply to the lifestyle of the communities I researched, but also the modernization of life wasn't complete or it was still underway. And there was a special irony in this, because many people in the Copperbelt [in Zambia] had invested in modernization and took some time to figure out what they were investing in, what the investment they made offered, and [they] had this strong sense of direction: we are moving, advancing, progressing, we are leaving the old ways behind and entering new ways. This all appears as a type of non-updated modernization theory being lived today. There was a local ideology about how the world works and, during the time I was there, people were realizing that this was no longer a good outcome for their lives. So I realized that it wasn't just an economic crisis, people were fighting consumerism, it was something like that, but it was also a crisis of meaning, people were living through a difficult period to understand why they were suffering. And this kind of assessment of modernization appeared in two forms: on the one hand, as the theory I was testing and, on the other, it was the reality I was describing. I realized that I should treat it with more respect, taking customs into account, and that this idea of modernity is not just an opposition from the West, with no local meaning, but does have an intense meaning locally and became an aspiration. It had become something that people felt, something promised to them. But the promise was broken. This is what the book calls the *expectation of modernity*. This is not the idea that modernization is absent, but that it is present, as a set of expectations and near promises of rights, which people felt as if they could achieve, what had been taken away from them. And so it is this experience that I try to grasp here in the book.

FR: I found the idea you presented the other day very interesting... Your discussion about urbanization, for example, is clear to me. There used to be a kind of connection with space that has been completely lost. People maintain contact with space, but today it's completely unrecognizable, and we explain the relationship in a certain way. And this is interesting, because, as you said, it depends on what the focus of your writing is, whether you're writing with a focus on discussing development itself, or whether you're focused on another subject. Perhaps the uniqueness is related to this kind of connection, between modern things and traditional things, and the relationships that are being redrawn between these two spaces.

JF: But I think that one of the important points about recent urban research is that there was

a strong recognition that the situation was changing and, for British anthropology, this was a challenge. They chose to name this change, which is a problem of social changes, in which the normal situation was that societies didn't change. They had the idea that some societies were unequal, with more or less mobility, and that there was this other situation, which involved social changes, and so urban studies were very important for this. But they also raised a very strong idea of how and why things were changing. I remember for the moment Max Gluckman, known as a member of the Manchester School, who trained many students to work in Africa, particularly in the Copperbelt, and one of the things he expected the students to do as part of their training before fieldwork was to read histories related to industrialization in Britain. There was a clear idea that what was happening in the Copperbelt was analogous, or in a way a repetition, of what happened in England when it was industrializing.

RK: Wow, and it comes together because Gluckman also worked with law.

JF: It does come together, yes, it's a strong evolution of the workings in this kind of perspective.

RK: It's a discussion with Bohannan.

JF: Yes, yes. And he [Gluckman] called it the Industrial Revolution in Africa. So what the anthropologists were studying was the Industrial Revolution in Africa. Thus, there were two parts to the study: being in Africa, because we needed to know what the situation was like there, what was different, what was similar, and it was also motivated by knowing what was really happening with the Industrial Revolution. And we knew that it had to be examined. The surprising thing when I started the ethnography was to realize how well they did their ethnographic accounts, describing what was happening in the period I was there. It's very good ethnography, very rich, and reading Godfrey Wilson's accounts, which are of research done in the late 1930s, around the early 1940s, you can see that much of it still applies. But Wilson never imagined that this would be the case. He would never have imagined that, 60 years later, his idea would still apply that this was a situation of rapid change, in which people were migrating to another urban process, which could be the modernization of agriculture, the growth of a kind of Industrial Revolution in harmony, which would transform both the cities and the countryside. The irony is that the ethnography done by the Manchester School still applies, in a way. Much of what they described is still there. What was no longer there was that perception that things were taking a new turn, that confident and optimistic idea that the future is ascending and that we know where the end point is. Instead, there was this alarmist and frightening idea that they don't know what the future holds and if they were in a situation of deep uncertainty and danger.

FR: Which in a way is much more connected to your latest book, *Global Shadows*, if I understand correctly, in which you demonstrate that Africa is much more connected to the rest of the world.

JF: Yes, that is and always has been the case. The anthropology that was working in Zambia was closely connected to the economy. People like Godfrey Wilson recognized this. It was he [Wilson] who created the argument that what we are studying is a set of changes linked to changes that have taken place around the world. He was also the one who said that to understand the Copperbelt in Africa you have to understand that the world is preparing for wars, understand that people are buying armaments, made of copper, that is, he was drawing these connections very early on and in a way that the field as a whole would do later.

FR: And how was it, in *Global Shadows*, that you made a change from the work of traditional anthropology, and you weren't the only one, but you wrote about an Africa that is different, somehow. What was the process like?

JF: Well, of course it's not without purpose to write about Africa, and of course there's an ethnographic sense, because you're writing about the vastest continent in the world, which includes wide boundaries, wide disparity, and wide diversity. And you have to be careful with the results, have to be careful with that argument used by anthropology that refuses categories, that anthropology that doesn't know what it's talking about unless it's talking about the country you've worked in, the people you actually know, the language you know and starting from that kind of deep contact with a knowledge that exists there. That's why anthropologists have been very good at criticizing the grand theories that people have put forward. And I say: what I work on doesn't really work like that. And, you know, it's more complicated than that. And we're very good at creating these arguments. I think that's important, I don't discourage that kind of knowledge or argument. And I don't find myself impatient with this valorization of the local, which is part of our tradition. At the time I was doing my research, a lot of things were happening in the world; the whole process of structural adjustment in Africa, the politics of neoliberalism, the perception that the African states, post-colonization, were experiencing a kind of crisis, were receiving a lot of attention and were the subject of a lot of discussion in the world. And people were making discourses about it, television programs about the crisis in Africa, what the future of Africa would be, a discussion about democratization, etc. And anthropology had no part in this, anthropologists were left out of it. And not because they weren't asked, but because they refused to speculate about Africa, they thought the problem was being formulated incoherently, and the answer usually took the form: "well, you have to understand Africa as a continent in its entirety, about which we can't make generalizations at

that level, but let me tell you about the village I worked in...” and of course the conversation didn’t go much further than that, because nobody was interested in the village where this or that researcher had been. These conversations offered no gateway. And then I became increasingly convinced that we had to invest in talking on a broader scale, because the things other people were saying were very naive, at times racist and often stupid. And anthropologists knew that. But it seemed to me that there were things we could say, about this large-scale discussion that was being held about Africa. My starting point was that Africa is a category and, like any other category in the world, it is created by people. It’s not there, it doesn’t arise naturally. It is constructed. And like any other category, I only find its meaning in relation to other categorical terms and another system of categories. So the question was: what is Africa? Part of what we’re talking about here is the fact that the number of people living in Africa is evidently growing, and these people occupy a devalued and stigmatized position in the world, a place in the world, as I continue to call it. And so I tried to use the “South Africa” model to find some connections between specific things that I wouldn’t have found through ethnography or in another manner, and this broader forecast of occupying a specific place in the world, involuntarily and having to respond to everything they say about Africa. Many things that were happening, in a hidden way, became intelligible if you understand some responses to those affirmations, affirmations about an occupied, stigmatized, and devalued space in the world. And in the end maybe we had something to say about the crisis in Africa.

FR: So, the possibility exists to talk about broader cases through anthropology?

JF: I think it has to exist. And I think it’s always existed. We’ve always known. Clifford Geertz told us that we don’t study communities, we study relationships within communities. But I believe that sometimes there is a confusion between the geographical scale and abstraction. Because many of the things I’m interested in are part of a broader geographical scale, but you can also understand things that happen on very small geographical scales, which involve much broader issues. So it’s not just when you talk about issues on broader geographical scales that you abstract from the concrete; you abstract from the concrete when you describe this conversation.

FR: Thinking about this and your work, reading what you’ve written, I see that the categories of space and location, which are related to how people are in the world, in a specific space and how they imagine themselves, are a central theme in your thinking, aren’t they? Because I understand that you work with this a lot. How did it become so important? Space? I have the feeling that you combine some concepts that come from Foucault—space, government,

governmentality—but you take a very ethnographic approach.

JF: Yes. I would say that part of my approach to space comes from the Foucauldian tradition—which was very important to me—and I would also say that there is another part that comes from this tradition that studies Africa, in which the experience of apartheid and the development of equity after apartheid led to a very sophisticated way of thinking about space and its relationship to culture, something that is so well developed in Southern Africa that it goes unsaid because people take it for granted. But anthropological common sense says that these things exist in local peoples and these peoples can be found somewhere on the map on which you can make a circle and say: this is the place of these people. You can't help but be aware of this fact in southern Africa. Because what some of the researchers did was say: no, you're not from Southern Africa, this is a multicultural society and it was made up of very different persons and peoples, and each person has a sign of each of these peoples, and each of these peoples has a sign of the location to which they belong. And of course it was a very constructed and manipulated version that people were dealing with, and soon anthropologists researching Southern Africa realized that they couldn't talk about a tribe, or a people, without points of contention around it. Remember that this was a political construction, and the question of where these peoples belonged, where they were found, was also a highly contested political construction. That's why I think I've always stayed out of the discussion. I tried to look in the direction of an old common sense discussion in anthropology, which is that the world is like a small mosaic, a little different in each color of the stones, and our job is to give a sympathetic and accurate description of each of these little colored pieces, about the peoples and cultures around the world. And looking at it with eyes that have been conditioned to observe spaces in a micro way, by the experience of Southern Africa, to think about how local constructions are deeply suspicious, this has enabled me to develop a kind of self-conscious approach to space in this recent work.

FR: This is much more related not to your specific research in different places, but to your collaborative work with Akhil Gupta. What was it like working with Gupta? Because here, I have my doubts, but I think you're better known as Ferguson in partnership with Gupta than James Ferguson on his own. So how does working with someone else function? How do you write in partnership? Because it's not an obvious thing to write collectively.

JF: No, and I don't think it's something that normally works.

FR: And you work on different continents, with different references.

JF: Yes, yes. I haven't done collaborative writing, except in my collaboration with Akhil, and I don't think my temperament suits that. I have a strong sense of what my text should have and what makes sense to me. If I copy or make changes, I get upset and put everything back where it was. I have this adversary and so I don't think it's easy for me, but the process of working with Akhil has always been very easy. I think we have a kind of intellectual compatibility. And it wasn't about working in India or working in Africa. We shared dissatisfaction with the way anthropology in the United States was practiced and, although we didn't start in the same places, we ended up in the same places. So the writing process was always a pleasure and also very simple most of the time. And we did some parts in different ways. Sometimes we divided it up and wrote in sections, as a way of beginning. In other cases, we made drafts and sent them to each other; it was a process of groping our way through, because each part was different from the next.

FR: Because it's something that's not easy to do. I don't know if it's possible to learn how to do it, but it's something we're not trained to do. In other fields of knowledge, researchers are trained to build knowledge collectively.

JF: That's true. And our discipline tends to be based on area specializations. You study this area, I study that other one, so you write this section, and I write that other one. And the collaborations have been theoretical, in the areas where we are on solid ground. They haven't been divided between different collaborative sections, but the researchers have been working on arguments together. It's a more demanding type of collaboration.

FR: About neoliberalism, which is related to your latest work, I have the feeling that you have an uncomfortable distance from the term, as well as with modernization and tradition, but on the other hand, you wanted to talk about neoliberalism. In a way, you're criticizing some ways of talking about neoliberalism. How did you manage to talk about it?

JF: I think your question starts with the good observation that *neoliberalism* is similar to other large categories that have come to structure the scientific social debate in the past, such as *development*, *modernization*, or *globalization*. This provides us with a framework within which we can talk about big questions such as: what is happening in the world today? And why? How is what is happening in Brazil related to what is happening in southern Africa? This gives us an umbrella under which very important things are said. But I think that, like these other terms, the danger is that they provide *prefabricated* answers to these questions. So you say: ah, *neoliberalism* again! And we tend to study poverty-stricken areas and find that people are

gaining some kind of “crutch” and losing something, and then we say: ah, it’s neoliberalism. They are poor and marginalized people and therefore obviously suffer the worst effects of this situation. That’s why we call them *powerless*, which means having no power, it means they will suffer the worst. And the idea of explaining this away by invoking the label of neoliberalism is becoming more and more intolerant. I therefore tend to use the term more often as an adjective than as a noun.

There is a family of terms that are related, that you can describe as neoliberal, but they are not a thing, they are not entities that come out of the sky and do things. And there are, for example, the techniques of government and a very interesting literature describing governmentality, a kind of Foucauldian literature, which says that neoliberalism is not only related to property, social classes, and power, but also involves inventions, techniques, ways of doing things. And I think that’s interesting. These techniques travel and are used in different ways, in different contexts, and we didn’t know, until a while ago, how they can be used, because, like other mechanisms, they can be used to do different things. One thing is that social policy, for example, is that certain engine of neoliberalism, that is, engines, mechanisms put in place to work as social policy that has to achieve certain objectives. Instead of assuming that there is an intrinsic political meaning in things because they are neoliberal, instead of accepting once again the idea that if they are neoliberal they are part of neoliberalism, and if they are part of neoliberalism, they are the enemy, open minds of anthropology say: there is something happening here, let’s find out what it is, let’s see what people are doing with it. I constructed an argument in analogy with the way certain insurance techniques were created and the statistical reasoning that allowed insurance to emerge, the existence of which depended on the establishment of statistical regularity. And how did this happen? It happened when large employers began to keep track of how many accidents happened in their companies and how much this cost them. The initial idea was just to cut costs; what seemed like an ordinary project, large employers trying to reduce their costs, led them to actually count the industrial accidents that happened regularly each year. This made it possible to develop these techniques, as well as others. This counting became the technical basis of the welfare state, which produces big interplays for the working class. And not because industrial accident statistics had any essential vocation to target the working class. It’s just a particular technique that was available at a certain time, it emerged for a particular project, but there were political forces that made it possible to use the statistics to develop social protection for workers, for example. And I would like to be able to maintain the same openness to some of the techniques we see today. What do these techniques do? They do what people do with them. Let’s look and try to understand what people are doing with them. What are the possibilities and what are the dangers? I even think that we tend to identify the dangers much better. We say: I don’t want to look at that, that’s bad. And

often it is, but let's also try to look at the possibilities and the things that affect us. In Brazil there is a strong sense of possibility. It's not a place where everything is getting worse and everyone has the perception that everything is in decline. There is political interplay, and the political struggle here has not been in vain and has something to show for it. And there is a perception that we have created some capabilities and some improvements. I think this perception of positive policy is very important. Certainly in the United States, the whole discussion about liberalism is related to denunciations: I saw this coming! As if it was something very important to predict something. And most of the world doesn't care whether you predicted it or not, it's not a very powerful kind of policy.

FR: At UFF you raised a discussion that is partly related to the market. You mentioned Mauss' treatment of possible revolutions and his forecasts linked to urbanization and the market. On the other hand, I think that in Mauss' appropriation of the political genres, he wasn't defending the gift of the market, since in Mauss there are economic gifts, markets, societies, and places where people exchange things. It's different from assuming an economic gift, a good economy. It seems to me that this is another way for an anthropologist to denounce neoliberalism and also capture tradition and reciprocity. All reciprocity is good, in any case, just as the economic gift is good. But when he said that the market is important, he wasn't saying that economic reciprocity and gifts are good; it's something else. It's not capitalism; it is, on the other hand, something like the market in Africa that appears in his work. And it's been around for a long time, but it's not capitalism and it's not the gift economy. It's something else.

JF: But Mauss didn't dismiss the idea of people seeking advantages in their transactions. It's a sentimentalized version of Mauss that in which what is valued is this kind of gift. His point is precisely the opposite. It's a very antagonistic process and also one of the ways in which people compete with each other, but of course it's not just about competing. And people with whom you compete are people with whom you connect, which doesn't seem to be the case, just because you're talking about the market rather than the exchange of gifts. Even so, there is a negativist quality and a social quality to these transactions. And I think part of what I took from your Bolshevik thesis was to say: "you've failed to understand how the market is a model of sociability and, if you want to build real socialism, you have to build it on the sociability that people have as well." And, yes, some are more desirable than others, in some directions we should focus on following and in others we should focus on running away from them, but they all have to have their place within sociability and in the terms in which it is formed. And markets are important in this sense. The Bolsheviks said that people should work for society, for communism, but instead, they want nice shoes. That's one of communism's biggest historical

mistakes, giving this meaning to material culture by having the idea that it was the bourgeoisie that wanted my shoes. Well, I'm going to be an anthropologist here and say: people have been marked by the desire for commodities for a long time. It's not the bourgeoisie that wants nice shoes, and the specialized production of luxury items, of luxury goods, is not capitalist. When the production of such items emerged, it was not a capitalist society. It was a very elaborate production of luxury goods for a specific market, so let's not make the mistake of confusing commodities and the desire for commodities with capitalism or the bourgeois class. And I guess you could say: maybe we can build a kind of socialism in which it's possible to have nice shoes, because why can't that be part of a conception of a good life?

FR: Thinking about Sahlins, in the book *Stone Age Economics*, it seems that in a way, in anthropology, but not in all anthropology, we have been trained with the idea that you find two paths: either by having a lot or by deciding to accept little.

JF: Yes, you have to overcome your desire.

RK: I have a few questions about this. The first thing is that exchange is not the problem, according to economic anthropology, and everyone knows that. The problem is accumulation and the inequality that accumulation generates, that is, that results from accumulation and that serves to exclude people from exchange.

JF: This is where we come to capitalism, as an engine of accumulation and an engine of production.

RK: Godelier uses the word surplus to differentiate substantially between what is more than what you need to consume. And then I support Jim's idea, which is focusing on consumption and distribution. It's much more than what you're talking about—consumption and distribution. But also more freedom for consumption and distribution of money that they give you—you get the money and you're free to consume. But if you don't want to go into consumption, if you want to accumulate, you start to go into production, because if you accumulate, you hire people to produce, and even if you're accumulating very slowly, you'll accumulate. Of course, it's not natural for human beings to have to accumulate, that's silly, but it's an option, accumulating is an option. And economic anthropology shows us that some societies decided not to accumulate, they chose to destroy, distribute, any other thing. But our society, at a certain point in history, decided to accumulate, and that's the capitalist system we're dealing with. So the question is, do the economies of distribution and consumption necessarily go with a capitalist society or

do they go, more or less like Pierre Clastres, questioning society against the state, but the other way around because Clastres said: if you leave society alone, a state will emerge, you have to react, react against it. You have to act actively against this human nature for the state. Which is absolutely... it's an argument against his own argument. That's what I think, it doesn't mean that it's right or wrong, but what I mean is that if you keep distributing money, it's part of doing that, it doesn't mean that you're doing it against capitalism, you're just universalizing the power of consumption; in fact, you're expanding, not universalizing the power of consumption, and maybe you're also construing more capitalists who won't consume, but will save it and will be new accumulators. Because the favelas are a great example here in Brazil; in them there are some people who are outside of the labor market, or in informal work, and they always have the same things, and there are others who build apartments and buildings and become rich, have five stores, businesses, and people say: how can he if he lives in a favela?! Well, he got there without consuming, by saving, but in the beginning he was just like any other person. And that's not human nature, it's part of the ideology of capitalism, and we, as Jim is saying, are all immersed in this cultural and economic interplay. And we can all choose not to accumulate. Some people apparently choose not to. When I left the stock market, it was not because I didn't want to do it for moral reasons, I didn't want to do it not because I liked being poor, but because I didn't think it would be something interesting, satisfying, fun, to do all my life. What was the point of staying here, earning money, for what? Most people, after a while, not only don't know anything, but they earn money and don't know how to consume it. They know how to reproduce it and accumulate it, but if you say to them: we're going to have vacations, vacations... oh, no, that's too boring, being here is much more interesting. And that's not just because they're afraid of losing their money, but because they don't understand that life has other challenges for them. I wasn't an anthropologist at the time, I was just a young adult. But anyway, I think that distribution and reciprocity are not something idealized outside of capitalism. It's what Jim's Lecture was saying at ANPOCS, what comes after the social, after the social welfare state, because the social welfare state would like everyone to stay in the same place, full employment, working for capitalism, but suddenly that's not what happened, full employment, and that's never going to happen, not in Africa, not in Brazil. So you have to give these people money to sustain capitalist production or any other production and also for these people to do whatever they want. That's what happened in Brazil, which is an example—Brazil came out of the crisis in a good way, because Lula, before the crisis, gave people money and, when the crisis hit, they were buying refrigerators, TV sets, cars and everything you can imagine; that's why industry didn't feel the shock. Because at that time it was ok, people were consuming, credit was very easy and not just cheap, but easy, because the distribution of credit is also distribution. If you went somewhere to shop, you had to be employed to get credit. But now they say: if you own

something, ok, you can get credit. So it's much more than the amount of credit itself, but also increasing access to credit and reducing rates and interest. And Lula did this, the Banco do Brasil, Caixa Econômica [banks]; the president made them end all the paper requirements for anyone who wanted money, giving them R\$ 500.00, or R\$ 1,000.00; the credit was granted, and they assessed what they would do with it. I think I'm actually asking a question, I think this is part of capitalism, it's not something—Marcel Mauss, traditional exchanges, gift—it's not that, it's part of capitalism, after the social welfare state didn't work, it was necessary to change tactics; so the things they're doing, distributing money for example, they aren't going to end accumulation, they're not going to end inequality, because the owners of the means of production will remain the same.

JF: I think you're completely right. The social programs we're talking about, such as Bolsa Família in Brazil, are not outside of capitalism or within major changes in capitalism. They actually take place within capitalism or respond to a certain kind of failure, a kind of impossibility of capitalism itself. So, about capitalism I would say something that I say about neoliberalism, or, in other words, I think we should be careful not to assume what capitalism is or how it is. Because *capitalism* covers a huge chessboard and there is immense diversity within capitalist societies. Not least because capitalism is not the only thing that is happening within capitalist societies. On this point, I work with the theories of some geographers who have very interesting arguments. For example, in the pure capitalist system, both in relation to capital and wages, the way we've come to think about how distribution takes place is historical; given all the things that are produced in the world, which of them should I have? The answer is given by the market, right? Since I can have it if I can afford it. For most of us, the answer is given by our work; if we're employed, have salaries, and it's this salary that allows us access to consumption. But what is different, and perhaps holds the potential for something more radical to happen, is the idea that there is a large majority of the population that is accessing distribution in a way that does not involve formal work. What is distinctive is precisely the idea that even those who are not formal workers can be elevated to the category of consumers. And they will be able to access a certain level of distribution, remembering that it's not much, of course. You'll have a small piece of the pie and you're not a wage earner. The most utopian proponents of basic income say that this is the end of the problem, we can spend it and continue to develop towards a society in which distribution is not about selling your labor to capitalism, but a kind of right. You can imagine who these authors are, from Paris. One of them has an article called "Capitalism has evolved into communism," in which he says, basically, that income could be the way to end capitalist society by using forms created in capitalism to do this, and could lead to a non-capitalist society. This shows that this is not a reformist agenda, we are actually

redesigning capitalism and making the poor less miserable. There are certain lines of thought here that have in mind something more ambitious than that.

FR: So the question is: don't we need to do the same kind of work on concepts like the state and capitalism? We all assume that capitalism is there, and we assume what its functions are. In a way, is this way of thinking about the national state a problem?

JF: Yes, there is an idealized model of how these things work.

FR: In a way, it's like the idea that we can do the same with wages and corporate stocks. Idealized capitalism is made by people investing money in stocks; it's the idealized model of how capitalism should work that is realized in a way that makes policies produce capitalism, idealized capitalism.

JF: One of the reasons I use the word share to talk about legitimate parts is because it's a word that comes from capitalism. It's not that capitalism doesn't know anything about shares, but things are shared in a very institutionalized way. We've created a modern corporation in which you own shares, and every year people make sure that the shares have been properly looked after, that the dividends have been paid out properly and so on. The way it's distributed is completely anti-democratic, because it's not based on your status as a citizen, but on your status as an owner, on how many dollars you've been putting in and what you own. But the sharing is very advanced, very elaborate. And it seems to me that this is something we should develop, for the same reason I think we should respond every time people describe capitalism as something based on private property, because the modern corporation is a type of property that is not private; it is actually collective, it involves people owning things in common. These people who own in common are shareholders, and this commonly involves millions and thousands of people, and there are very elaborate institutions to assure that each one has their share; so it's a type of collective property. A different kind of collective property, not merely private property.

RK: Here we come to a very important distinction, between private and collective, which in the United States is an important distinction. Because in Brazil, you don't have the same idea. In the United States there is the idea that public is something collective and is opposed to private, which is something individual. But here there are things that can be both public and private, they can be appropriated in both ways, in other words, it's another kind of appropriation, which has nothing to do with property, but with how you use it, how you get it. For example, private universities have owners, owners who are not owners by law. It's not something private, it's

something “particular,” not collective. But sometimes the owners don’t own it, because the legal entity that owns it is an anonymous legal entity. But that guy is the owner; so, for example, if you own something, the owner is always rich, but the university is quite poor. And the owner has nothing to do with it. But he is the owner, it’s appropriation, it’s not exactly property, the right to property, in many ways, ends up being appropriation, which is very different from other notions of property. Marx and René Levy described this. René Levy worked on the subject in the comparative study of the law, making an interesting discussion about the many rights that exist from the right to property and that are combined in many ways and in many countries. In any case, I think the topic is quite stimulating. And Jim is concerned about all these things, and in a much better way than Wacquant, who thinks that everyone is going to be arrested, that capitalism is going to arrest everyone, but I want to say that it’s a very interesting argument against this dumb idea, which is an idea that is fashionable here in Brazil.

FR: So getting to the last question, Kant, Brazilian, Lisa, Finnish, Akhil, Indian. I remember Linton describing the American citizen...

JF: 100% American.

FR: yes... 100% American... it’s fun when you look at this.

JF: Well, I think the idea of national anthropologies can lead to mistakes. They are national formations, but there are very important transits and intersections that result from this. It’s particularly true that American academia, for political and economic reasons, has been able to attract talent from all over the world. That’s why the people who are doing research at American universities are often foreigners, recent immigrants or people who have had intellectual training in other places. And you can look at all the Nobel prizes that the United States wins, many of the scientists who receive the prizes are not Americans, they are people who come from all over the world and work in American universities, because they are good places to work. And something very similar happens in our field. Many different currents of thought come to American universities and are not necessarily produced by American universities. They are produced in other places, they arrive and enter into interesting interactions. This isn’t something recent, we’ve lost a lot of anthropological history by inscribing it in national traditions; so many of the American anthropologists we’re talking about, the Boasian School, for example, are people from Germany, the intellectual socialization, sensibility and language is Germanic. British Social Anthropology is very strong in Southern Africa, a large part of their studies are in South Africa. Malinowski was Polish, some are French. And so it has always been.

FR: I have the feeling that, not in your case, but in some cases, there is a big difference between considering others simply because they are anthropologists and producing on equal terms with people from different anthropological intellectual environments. I have the perception that this is an important point.

JF: But I think that's always been there, it's a funny story that we tell about Godfrey Wilson. Malinowski was apparently trying to win his battle with British anthropology, and he knew that to win, for the next generation, he would have to have a champion who was neither foreign nor Jewish, which was a problem, because they were all foreign or Jewish. But he selected Godfrey Wilson as someone who had intellectual talent and a temperament that would allow him to be the torchbearer, to carry on and win the battle. Godfrey Wilson committed suicide soon after, and Malinowski's plans failed. Then the others won, and Malinowski had to solve the problem himself. This is folklore, of course, but that's what I heard.

FR: Thank you!

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