Global Disconnect: Abjection and the Aftermath of Modernism

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Introduction

In a recently completed book, *Expectations of Modernity* (1999), I explore how mineworkers in the town of Kitwe on the Zambian Copperbelt have dealt with a long period of economic adversity. The book deals with a range of ethno-historical questions: changing forms of labor migration; new patterns of urban-to-rural mobility; the dynamics of household formation and dissolution; the relation of urban cultural forms to the micro-political-economic relations linking urban workers to their rural kin and allies. In all of these domains, I have been less interested in constructing a developmental sequence of social and cultural forms than in exploring their temporal coexistence; less interested in a succession of “typical” forms over time than in an understanding of the whole spread (what Stephen Jay Gould (1996) calls the “full house”) of diverse modes of getting by that may exist at any one moment, and how that spread is affected by political-economic shifts over time.

In arguing for nonlinear, variation-centered models of social transformation (aiming to reconstruct what Gould (1996) calls the “bush” of actual variation rather than an ideal tree or ladder of succeeding “typical forms”), I have been concerned to demonstrate the inadequacy of what I call the modernist metanarratives through which urban life in Africa has so often been understood. Here, my target is not only the explicit Eurocentrism that allowed the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute anthropologists to see the Copperbelt as the new Birmingham of an African Industrial

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COMMUNITY (1999), I explore how copperbelt have dealt with a range of ethnographic terms of urban-to-rural mobilization; the relation of urban workers to and cultural forms than in a succession of “typical” spread (what Stephen Jay of getting by that may exist at political-economic shifts over of social transformation (aimed at actual variation rather than ), I have been concerned to nationalist metanarratives through. Here, my target is not only Livingstone Institute anthropologist of an African Industrial Economic

Revolution, but equally the still-ubiquitous use of a set of linear, directional concepts to frame scholarly understandings of urban Africa – what I call the “izations”: urbanization, modernization, proletarianization, commoditization, etc.

The period since the mid-1970s or so in Zambia poses a formidable challenge to such habitual ways of understanding the meaning of urban Africa. With declining terms of trade, increasingly worked-out mines, and the crushing burden of a debt crisis, Zambia’s copper-based, urban industrial economy has seen a sustained and profound contraction. This has brought with it not only impoverishment and hardship, but also a strange flood of new “izations.” The “Industrial Revolution in Africa” seems to have been called off: industrialization has been replaced by “de-industrialization”. The long-documented flow of migrants to the Copperbelt cities, too, is now running backwards, with urban-to-rural migration now outpacing rural-to-urban – a phenomenon for which the term “counterurbanization” has been coined. The apparently inevitable process of proletarianization, meanwhile, is now replaced by mass layoffs and “back to the land” exercises: the “unmaking,” rather than the making, of a working class. And now, with the privatization of the state-held mining company, it seems that even “Zambiaization” (the nationalist policy of replacing white management with qualified black Zambians) is being replaced by what is now being called “de-Zambianization,” the rehiring of white, expatriate management.

A new generation of Zambians, then, has come of age in a world where the modernist certainties their parents grew up with have been turned upside down, a world where life expectancies and incomes shrink instead of grow, where children become less educated than their parents instead of more, where migrants move from urban centers to remote villages instead of vice versa. It is the modernization story through the looking glass, where modernity is the object of nostalgic reverie, and “backwardness” the anticipated (or dreaded) future.

In reflecting on this extraordinary turn of events, this paper will move between two levels. The first level is the lived experience of actual Zambian workers, who have seen the modernist story-line transformed, in their own lifetimes, from a marvelous promise to a cruel hoax. The second level is a set of global transformations that allow us to see the Zambian case as part of a much more general phenomenon, which I argue is nothing less than the collapse of the global modernist project that once seemed to define the future of what we used to call “the developing world.” I have in mind here not only the collapse of the developmentalist vision of the world that saw the “new nations” of the Third World as western nation-states in embryo, and spoke breathlessly of the “coming of age” of “emerging” African nations that would one day soon – through the miracle of political and economic development – somehow resemble England and France. That was one side of the story. But the other was a vision of historical progress through a process of hooking citizens up into a national – and ultimately universal – grid of modernity. This paper will discuss specifically the “grid” of electrical service, and the idea of a universal participation in modernity via copper connectivity as a metaphor for this. But we might think as well here of health care, where the postwar modernist ideal of a universal grid (epitomized in such things as the campaigns for universal vaccination against polio or smallpox) can be contrasted against today’s tendency to fragmentation and privatization (which gives us not the polio vaccine, but AIDS combo
therapy: managing the disease for those who can pay, while the poor are bluntly notified that it is economically more rational for them to die. Or schooling, where the universal grid of public education is today under siege all over the world. Or public space and the rule of law, where walled communities and fortified private spaces increasingly undermine the social and political promise of a universalistic “public.” (I note that recent figures show that private police in “the new South Africa” now outnumber public police by a factor of three to one.)

By reflecting on Zambia’s recent experience of decline and – in modernist terms – “failure,” I do not mean to suggest that this experience forms a template for an inevitable African future (or even an inevitable Zambian future). On the contrary, my analysis of recent Zambian history leads to an emphasis on non-linear trajectories and multiplicities of pathways; to say that Africa is going “down” today is as false and misleading as it was to say that it was going “up” in the 1960s. But there is no disputing that the social experience of “decline” (notwithstanding the variety of causes and contexts) is today of quite wide relevance across many areas of the African continent (and, indeed, in many other regions – e.g. Russia or Indonesia – where recent political-economic restructuring has had comparable effects). For that reason, an analysis of the political and theoretical significance of that social experience may perhaps be of some wider relevance.

As an ethnographic point of entry into the social experience of decline on the Copperbelt, consider the following brief anecdote. One afternoon in 1989, I was chatting with a young officer of the mineworkers’ union, who was expressing his dismay at how difficult it had become to find neckties of decent quality. Soon, we were talking about the two main retail shopping districts in Kitwe, one located in what had once been in colonial days the “European” town center, the other in the former “location” reserved for “Africans.” What struck me was that these two shopping districts were still called (as they had been in colonial days) “first class” and “second class,” respectively. Why, I wondered, did people continue using these terms? Wasn’t this an embarrassing holdover of colonial thinking, and of the idea of “second-class” status for Africans? Well, my companion replied, nobody really thought of it that way; it was just what the areas were called. Then he thought for a moment, and continued. “Anyway,” he blurted with a bitter, convulsive laugh, “now it’s all ‘second-class’, isn’t it?” I take this very particular way of experiencing one’s own social world as having become “second class” as a point of departure for what follows.

Abjection and the New World Society

When Godfrey Wilson wrote his “Essay on the Economics of Detribalization in Northern Rhodesia” in 1941, he considered that the Africans of Northern Rhodesia had just entered into an economically and culturally interconnected “world society,” a “huge world-wide community” within which they would soon find a place for themselves as something more than peasants and unskilled workers (Wilson 1941: 12–13). The “civilized” clothing and manners to which so many urban Africans attached such importance, he argued, amounted to a claim to full membership in that worldwide community. Indeed, Wilson suggested, it was for this very reason than many white settler landlords doffed his hat in the formal evening wear, Wilson argued, were not so much a claim to be respected as “men, members of the Western world.”

That claim to a full membership in a racist colonial society’s “first class” whites, who were incomparably those of the colonial natives, who did not lose at all that, by overturning the colonial order, that Zambians should have had to. Zambia’s independence bar was indeed disputed, its positions of power and privilege, its wealth, were simultaneously seized by a new elite. It was the world of the “first class” white men: the state-of-the-art nationalized airlines, and such symbols of a “modern world.” It was a world that Zambia was now more devastatingly blighted, that the sense of a loss of the nation to Zambia, in the good old days of a “modern world.” It was a world that Zambia had ever so recently known: the early 1960s concert in the green to pay tribute to arts, to Zambia. But it is not to Zambia. In the 1970s, Zambia had a national airline, Zambia Airways, with a fleet of planes, private jets, and the nations both expected and allayed at Lusaka (Bombay, Larnaca). By 1988, one by one dropped off, and one by one. But Zambia Airways had all apparently been lifted. Today, a thrice-weekly flight to Zambia for a non-African.

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than many white settlers resented and feared the well-dressed African who politely doffed his hat in the street, preferring to see Africans in suitably humble rags. Fine formal evening wear, ballroom dancing, European-style handshaking—these, Wilson argued, were not inauthentic cultural mimicry but expressed “the Africans’ claim to be respected by the Europeans and by one another as civilized, if humble, men,” members of the new world society” (Wilson 1942: 19–20, emphasis added).

That claim to a full membership in “the new world society,” of course, was refused in a racist colonial society. The color bar explicitly distinguished between “first-class” whites, who held the privileges of such membership, and “second-class” natives, who did not (see Ferguson 1999, ch. 1). But nationalism promised to change all that, by overturning the colonial system and banishing forever the insulting idea that Zambians should be second-class citizens in their own land. The early years of Zambia’s independence seemed on the verge of delivering on that promise. The color bar was indeed dismantled as educated black Zambians rose to unprecedented positions of power and responsibility; a booming economy and strong labor unions meanwhile helped even ordinary workers to enjoy a new level of comfort and prosperity. As an “emerging new nation,” Zambia appeared poised to enter the world of the “first class.” It would be like other modern nations right down to its state-of-the-art national airline…. With a rising standard of living, bustling urban centers, and such symbols of modern status as suits made in London and a national airline, membership in the “new world society” seemed finally to be at hand.

It was the faltering of the “Industrial Revolution” that changed all that. For no sooner had the “blitzkrieg” of industrialization turned the world upside down for millions of Central Africans than rapid industrial decline set in motion another, even more devastating blitz. The economic hardships this has entailed have been staggering (see Ferguson 1999, ch. 1). But equally important, if harder to measure, has been the sense of a loss of membership in that “world society” of which Wilson spoke. Zambia, in the good times, had been on the map, a country among others in the “modern world.” It was, older miners reminded me, a place regularly visited by internationally known musical acts conducting world tours. One man recalled an early 1960s concert by the American country-and-western star Jim Reeves, for instance, and asked me with great feeling why such American acts no longer came to Zambia. But it is not just country-and-western acts that have stopped coming to Zambia. In the 1970s, international airlines such as British Caledonian, UTA, Lufthansa, and Alitalia connected Lusaka via direct flights to Frankfurt, Rome, London, and other European centers; British Caledonian even offered a flight to Manchester. Zambia’s own national airline, Zambia Airways, also flew an impressive fleet of planes, proudly piloted by black Zambian pilots, to international destinations both expected (London, Frankfurt, New York) and surprising (Belgrade, Bombay, Larnaca). But as the economic situation deteriorated, the European carriers one by one dropped Zambia from their routes. Finally, in 1996, it was announced that Zambia Airways itself would be liquidated. Like the “Industrial Revolution,” it had all apparently been a big mistake. Efficiency required that it be shut down. Today, a thrice-weekly British Airways plane to London is the only flight leaving Zambia for a non-African destination.

For many Zambians, then, as these details suggest, recent history has been experienced not—as the modernization plot led one to expect—as a process of
moving forward or joining up with the world but as a process that has pushed them out of the place in the world that they once occupied. The only term I have found to capture this sense of humiliating expulsion is abjection (which I adapt from Kristeva (1982); see also Borneman (1996)). Abjection refers to a process of being thrown aside, expelled, or discarded. But its literal meaning also implies not just being thrown out but being thrown down – thus expulsion, but also debasement and humiliation. This complex of meanings, sad to report, captures quite precisely the sense I found among the Copperbelt mineworkers – a sense that the promises of modernization had been betrayed, and that they were being thrown out of the circle of full humanity, thrown back into the ranks of the “second class,” cast outward and downward into the world of rags and huts where the color bar had always told “Africans” they belonged.

With much talk today of globalization, of new forms of worldwide interconnection, and of yet another “emerging” “new world society,” it is useful to consider briefly where Zambia fits in all of this, and what the story I have told here of decline and abjection might have to say about the nature of this “new world order.” The meaning of the Zambian case, I suggest, is not simply that it illustrates a gloomy process of decline and disconnection that has had no place in many of the roister accounts of the new global economy. Beyond simply illustrating the downside of global capitalism, what has happened in Zambia reveals something more fundamental about the mechanisms of membership, exclusion, and abjection upon which the contemporary system of spatialized global inequality depends.

When the color bar cut across colonial Africa, it fell with a special force upon the “westernized Africans”: those polished, well-dressed, educated urbanites who blurred the lines between a “civilized,” first-class white world, and a supposedly “primitive,” second-class black one. It was they – the “not quite/not white” (Bhabha 1997) – whose uncanny presence destabilized and menaced the racial hierarchy of the colonial social order. And it was they who felt the sting not just of exclusion but of abjection: of being pushed back across a boundary that they had been led to believe they might successfully cross. In a similar way, when the juncture between Africa and the industrialized world that had been presented as a global stairway (leading from the “developing” world to the “developed”) revealed itself instead as a wall (separating the “first world” from the “third”), it was the Copperbelt and places like it – proud examples of just how modern, urban, and prosperous an emerging Africa could be – that experienced this boundary-fixing process most acutely, as a kind of abjection. The experience of abjection here was not a matter of being merely excluded from a status to which one had never had a claim but of being expelled, cast out-and-down from that status by the formation of a new (or newly impermeable) boundary. It is an experience that has left in its wake both a profound feeling of loss as well as the gnawing sense of a continuing affective attachment to that which lies on the other side of the boundary. When Copperbelt workers of an older generation spoke to me with such feeling of having once, long ago, owned a fine tuxedo or attended a concert by the Ink Spots or eaten T-bone steak at a restaurant, they were registering a connection to the “first class” that they had lost many years before but still felt, like the phantom pains from a limb long ago amputated.

When the Copperbelt mineworkers expressed their sense of abjection from an imagined modern world “out there,” then, they were not simply lamenting a lack of connection but articulating what they inevitably described their lives as being.

As Neil Smith has recently described, a rhetorical celebration of the last two decades [in Africa: Culture & Economy, 1997: 180]. Indeed, a “new world economy,” made almost “threat” to rich countries in them in Africa, who risk being the continent falling by Africa “has been treated as a “capitalism while being let “redlined” in global foreign aid flows as well, most of global capital” (p. 187). Smith convenient object lesson, without the specter of the new 1997: 187) notes, “the fantastically spaces of accumulation matched by a wholly precisely this “flexibility” of forms of connection with international wage work.
connection but articulating a specific experience of disconnection, just as they inevitably described their material poverty not simply as a lack but as a loss. When we think about the fact that Zambia is today disconnected and excluded in so many ways from the mainstream of the global economy, it is useful to remember that disconnection, like connection, implies a relation and not the absence of a relation. Dependency theorists once usefully distinguished between a state of being undeveloped (an original condition) and a state of being underdeveloped (the historical result of an active process of underdevelopment). In a parallel fashion, we might usefully distinguish between being unconnected (an original condition) and being disconnected (the historical result of an active process of disconnection). Just as being hung up on is not the same thing as never having had a phone, the economic and social disconnection that Zambians experience today is quite distinct from a simple lack of connection. Disconnection, like abjection, implies an active relation, and the state of having been disconnected requires to be understood as the product of specific structures and processes of disconnection. What the Zambian case shows about globalization, I will suggest, is just how important disconnection is to a “new world order” that insistently presents itself as a phenomenon of pure connection.

Global Redlining and the Neoliberal New World Order: Zambia is No Exception?

As Neil Smith has recently argued, in spite of aggressive “structural adjustment” and a rhetorical celebration of “free-market capitalism,” “what is remarkable about the last two decades [in Africa] is its virtual systematic expulsion from capitalism” (1997: 180). Indeed, a recent 35-page feature in The Economist on “The Global Economy,” made almost no reference to Africa at all, making only a passing note of the “threat” to rich countries that may be poised by “the 500m or so people, most of them in Africa, who risk being left out of the global boom.” With private ventures in the continent falling by 25 percent in the 1980s, and even further in the 1990s, Africa “has been treated to a crash course in the most vicious aspects of free-market capitalism while being largely denied any of the benefits” (pp. 180, 181). Effectively “redlined” in global financial markets, and increasingly cut off from governmental aid flows as well, most of sub-Saharan Africa today functions as “a veritable ghetto of global capital” (p. 179) – a zone of economic abjection that also makes a convenient object lesson for Third-World governments in other regions that might, without the specter of “Africanization” hanging over them, be tempted to challenge capital’s regime of “economic correctness” (Smith 1997; Ferguson 1995).

The very possibility of “redlining” on such a massive scale reveals that the muchvaunted “flexibility” of the new forms of global economy involves not simply new forms of connection but new forms of disconnection as well. With increasing international wage competition and pressure on state welfare provisions, as Smith (1997: 187) notes, “the global economy is ever more efficient at writing off redundant spaces of accumulation: the flexibility of investment and market options is matched by a wholly new flexibility in disinvestment and abandonment.” It is precisely this “flexibility” that makes global “redlining” possible, and that makes
Zambia's recent deindustrialization just as integral a part of globalization as the appearance of Mexican car factories or Shanghai skyscrapers.

To speak of expulsion and abandonment here is not to suggest that Zambia is today somehow outside of the world capitalist system (and thus needs to be brought back into it). The mining industry, though shrunken, continues to dominate the Zambian economy, and may even (if the current plan for full privatization brings the new capital for exploration and development that its boosters promise) expand again in years to come; capitalists continue to profit from Zambia's copper. Other forms of capitalist production of course remain important as well. But the more fundamental point here is that the abjected, “redlined” spaces of decline and disinvestment in the contemporary global economy are as much a part of the geography of capitalism as the booming zones of enterprise and prosperity; they reveal less the outside of the system than its underbelly. Expulsion and abandonment (in Smith's terms), disconnection and abjection (in my own), occur within capitalism, not outside of it. They refer to processes through which global capitalism constitutes its categories of social and geographical membership and privilege by constructing and maintaining a category of absolute non-membership: a holding tank for those turned away at the “development” door; a residuum of the economically discarded, disallowed, and disconnected – to put it plainly, a global “second class.”

In its “Industrial Revolution” era, it was copper that connected Zambia to the world. The world needed Zambia's copper, and it was copper that put the new nation on the economic world map, while bringing in the export earnings that financed everything from cars for urban workers to state prestige projects like Zambia Airways. But copper not only connected Zambia economically, it also provided a vivid symbol of a specifically modern form of world connection. The copper wire bars produced by Zambian refiners literally did connect the world, via telephone and power cables that were forming a rapidly ramifying net across the globe. From the Soviet rural electrification program, to the United States' model Tennessee Valley Authority project, to the new South Africa's township electricity programs, electrification has provided the twentieth century with perhaps its most vivid symbol of modernization and development. Fusing a powerful image of universal connection in a national grid with the classical Enlightenment motif of illumination of the darkness, electrification has been an irresistible piece of symbolism for the modernist state (expressed perhaps most vividly in Lenin's suggestion that the “backward” Soviet peasantry be uplifted by melting enough church bells into copper wire to permit the placing of a light bulb in every village (Coopersmith 1992: 154-5)).

It was no different in Zambia, where the electrification of the townships was a compelling symbol of inclusion, a sign that Africans, too, were to be hooked up with the “new world society.”

Today, the Copperbelt mine townships are still wired for electricity. But the service is intermittent, as equipment often breaks down, and the copper power cables are from time to time stolen for sale as scrap. What is more, few township residents can afford to pay the monthly charges for the use of electricity, so electric appliances go unused as women huddle around charcoal fires preparing the daily meals and the townships’ skies fill with gray smoke each morning.

Nowadays, global interconnection does not depend so much on copper. The development of fiber optics and satellite communications technology, for instance, means that there is today some kind of “advance” in global communications without relying on Zambian copper. Indeed, two out of three of Zambia’s 90 million are now on one estimate.4 With respect, as equally distributed, or at least, monopolied to the masses but rather to a fairly small number of the poorest people for phone service (The Times), and elites to ignore and use the systems and do their bidding. Wilson's “new world order” and even ultimate equality of a “new world order.” If it is true, but they were when Zambia was no exception, surely would eventually be still mouthed by those with more conviction. Many of the troublesome 500 million of the globe, with most of the rest, are.

Many of the people here have understood that “African” is, of abjection. I notice, in these circumstances – they are, one hand, the term international media use to chaos, and charity. As African as a stigma, suggested (tragically) on “class” Status but with an end of a wrenching. Africans, now” (see
of globalization as the others.

It suggests that Zambia is thus needs to be brought to dominate the privatization brings the promises but also that differentiates it. It creates new inequalities even as it brings into being new commonalities and lines of communication. And it creates new, up-to-date ways not only of connecting places but of bypassing and ignoring them.

Most Zambians, let us remember, have never made a telephone call in their lives. Indeed, two out of three human beings alive today can say the same, according to one estimate. With new technologies, will telecommunications now become more equally distributed, or even truly universal? One wonders. According to one recent report, at least, cellular telephone technology promises not to “hook up” the African masses but rather to make obsolete the very idea that they need to be “hooked up”: many of the poorest parts of the world, the article claims, may now never be wired for phone service (The Economist, 1993). For cellular technology allows businesses and elites to ignore their limited and often malfunctioning national telephone systems and do their business via state-of-the-art satellite connectivity, bypassing altogether the idea of a universal copper grid providing service to all.

Wilson’s “new world society,” for all its faults, implied a promise of universality and even ultimate equality that is strikingly absent from the current visions of the “new world order.” In the plotline of modernization, some countries were “behind,” it is true, but they were all supposed to have the means to “catch up” in the end. And Zambia was no exception. “Second-class” countries could and (the story promised) surely would eventually rise to the ranks of the “first class.” Today, this promise is still moistened by the ideologic “Africa” and the “black” of the “new world order” is nothing short of a colonial remnant, a reincarnation of an earlier version of Africa. The “new world order” is, in fact, a version of the old, updated.

Many of the people I spoke with on the Copperbelt understood this very well –
understood that “Africa,” in the new global dispensation, was becoming a category of abjection. I noticed that whenever people were trying to convey their problems – to describe their suffering, to appeal for help, to explain the humiliation of their circumstances – they described themselves not as Zambians but as Africans. On the one hand, the term evoked all the images associated with Africa in contemporary international media discourse: pictures of poverty, starvation, and war; refugees, chaos, and charity. On the other, of course, it evoked the old colonial usage of African as a stigmatized race category. Putting the two connotations together suggested (tragically, if accurately) a reimposition of the old, despised “second-class” status but within a new macro-political order. As one old man put it, at the end of a wrenching narration of his country’s downward slide: “We are just poor Africans, now” (see also Ferguson, 1997).
The End of Development

A number of recent critical analysts have heralded the end of the “age of development.” ^5 For Wolfgang Sachs, editor of the influential critical work _The Development Dictionary_ (1992), the whole project of development today “stands like a ruin in the intellectual landscape,” a disastrous failure now made “obsolete,” “outdated by history” (1992: 1, 2). It is not only that development has failed to deliver the economic growth and sociocultural modernization that it promised; more fundamentally, the whole ideal of development can no longer carry any conviction. Economically, Sachs argues, the very idea of the whole planet consuming at First-World levels presents an ecological disaster if not an impossibility, while socially and culturally, development offers only a thinly veiled westernization, a colonizing global monoculture that must choke out the “traditional” world’s wealth of diverse local modes of life. To the extent that Third-World people have themselves sought development, in this view, they have been misguided; the schemas of development have provided only “the cognitive base for [a] pathetic self-pity” (1992: 2), which has been self-defeating, and which must continue no longer.

Esteva argues in similar fashion that development has led Third-World peoples “to be enslaved to others’ experience and dreams” (Esteva 1992: 7). When United States President Harry Truman labeled two billion people as “underdeveloped” in 1949, they ceased being what they were, in all their diversity, and were transmogrified into an inverted mirror of others’ reality: a mirror that belittles them and sends them off to the end of the queue, a mirror that defines their identity, which is really that of a heterogeneous and diverse majority, simply in the terms of a homogenizing and narrow minority. (Esteva 1992: 7)

According to Esteva, the world would be well advised to do without such a concept (which is in any case “doomed to extinction” (1992: 7)), and proceed to emulate the “marginals” at the fringes of the capitalist economy who are rejecting the “needs” imposed by the economic worldview of development and reinventing a world without scarcity (much like Sahlin’s “original affluent society” of hunters and gatherers) (1992: 19–22). ^6

There is reason to be doubtful of such sweeping claims for the end of development. Most obviously, it is clear that ideas of development – often remarkably reconstructed ones at that – hold great sway in many parts of the world today, perhaps especially in areas (notably, many parts of East and Southeast Asia that have enjoyed recent rapid economic expansion (though the recent “crash” that has stricken many countries in the region may yet shake that developmentalist faith). More theoretically, one might well be suspicious of criticisms of inevitable linear teleologies and progressive successions of epochs that proceed by constructing their own inevitable linear teleologies and progressive successions of epochs, as so many contemporary “post-” and “end of . . .” narratives seem to do. ^7 But it remains true that something has happened in recent years to the taken-for-granted faith in development as a universal prescription for poverty and inequality. For Africa, at least, as for some other parts of the world, there is a real break with the certainties and expectations that made a development era possible. The “rolling back” of the state,
the abandonment of the goal of industrialization, the commitment to what are euphemistically called "market forces" and "private enterprise," and the shattering of expectations for economic convergence with the West, all come together to create a very real end, at least at the level of perceptions and expectations, of at least the grander versions of the development project in Africa.

Is this something to be celebrated? Critics like Sachs and Esteva give to this question an unequivocally affirmative answer. Development, they point out, has distorted people's understandings of their own histories, imposed Eurocentric values and ideals, and crowded out innumerable local ways of doing things. The sooner it disappears, they suggest, the better. There is much to recommend this view. Certainly, there is no reason why the people of former colonial territories should accept economic and cultural convergence with the West (whether it is owning a car, wearing suits made in London, or having a "modern family") as the ultimate measure of achievement or progress; the critics are quite right to attack the ethnocentrism of such an assumption, and to point out its historical contingency (see Escobar's excellent critique (1995)). Moreover, the ecological and human degradation created by what have been termed "overdeveloped" societies is only too evident; it is not obvious that such societies constitute a model to be emulated. It is also possible to show, as I have attempted to do in my own previous work (Ferguson 1994), that the conceptual problematic of development has served, in concrete instances and through specifiable mechanisms, as what I have termed an "anti-politics machine," systematically misrecognizing and depoliticizing understandings of the lives and problems of people living in what has long since come to be known as the Third World.

But critics such as Sachs and Esteva sometimes seem to forget that the post-World War II conceptual apparatus of development did not create global inequality at a stroke but only provided a new means of organizing and legitimating an only-too-real inequality that was already very well established. It was not Truman's speech in 1949 that sent Africa and other colonial territories to the "back of the queue," as Esteva implies; conquest, colonial rule, and centuries of predatory violence and economic exploitation saw to it that they were already there. "Development" was laid on top of already-existing geopolitical hierarchies; it neither created north-south inequality nor undid it but instead provided a set of conceptual and organizational devices for managing it, legitimating it, and sometimes contesting and negotiating its terms (see Bose 1997; Cooper 1997; Cooper and Packard 1997; Gupta 1997, 1998). The subordinate position ascribed to the Third World in development discourse was therefore not a figment of the imagination or a mere Eurocentric illusion but reflected an intractable political-economic reality that could not, and cannot, be wished or relabeled away. Third-World people who have sometimes viewed themselves as located "at the end of the queue" are therefore not victims of a self-destructive mystification, and they hardly require to be scolded for "pathetic self-pity."

Nor is there any reason to link the forecast end of development with any general liberation or new autonomy, as many critics have tended to do. For if development did not inaugurate the inequalities it organized, neither can its demise be expected to make them suddenly disappear. Just as the end of one mode of organizing and legitimating a global hierarchy (colonialism) did not end inequality but reconfigured
it, so does the (very partial) disintegration of another ("development") inaugurate not a new reign of freedom from scarcity and global hierarchy but a new modality of global inequality.

It is here, too, that we might register the ethnographic fact that the end of "the age of development" for Copperbelt workers (and, I suspect, for many others on the continent) has been experienced not as a liberation but as a betrayal. The "world society" that Godfrey Wilson anticipated has been taken out of play, and Zambians have been bluntly told that they are, and for the foreseeable future will remain, just so many "poor Africans." That the development story was a myth, and in some respects a trap, does not make the abrupt withdrawal of its promises any easier to take, or any less of a tragedy for those whose hopes and legitimate expectations have been shattered. If nothing else, "development" put the problem of global inequality on the table and named it as a problem; with the development story now declared "out of date," global inequality increasingly comes to appear not as a problem at all but simply as a naturalized fact.

In this context, simply celebrating the end of development is a response that is neither intellectually nor politically adequate. For without a continuing engagement with the problems of global inequality, there is a real danger that what Watts (1995) has termed "anti-development" critiques may aid and abet the current global abjection of Africa. The key questions in the present moment are less about the failures of Africa's developmentalist era than about what follows it. And here the celebration of social movements in a "postdevelopment era" has sometimes seemed to obscure the fact that the new political and economic institutions that govern the global political economy today are often less democratic and more exploitative than those that preceded them. Not only international organizations such as the IMF, World Bank, and World Trade Organization, but also NGOs, social movements, and "civil society," today participate in new, transnational forms of governmentality that need to be subjected to the same sort of critical scrutiny that has been applied to "development" in the past (Ferguson 1995, forthcoming; cf. Watts 1995).

At a more conceptual level, if the modernist story of development has lost its credibility, the most pressing question would appear to be not whether we should lament or celebrate this fact but rather how we can reconfigure the intellectual field in such a way as to restore global inequality to its status as "problem" without reintroducing the teleologies and ethnocentrism of the development metanarrative. What, in short, comes after "development"—both as an intellectual and cosmological framework for interpretation and explanation, and as a progressive political program for responding to its disastrous economic and social failures?

In seeking an answer to this question, we might do well to think seriously about the nonlinear loops and reversals that have characterized recent Zambian history. Much that was understood as backward and disappearing seems today to be most vital. Moore and Vaughan, for instance, have shown in their study of Zambia's Northern Province that the method of shifting cultivation known as citemene, long understood as the very essence of agricultural "backwardness," is alive and well in the 1990s, with most farmers continuing to incorporate it into their agricultural strategies—not as a way of trying to re-create the past but as a mode of coping with the overwhelming uncertainties of the present (Moore and Vaughan 1994: 234). Indeed, as a symbol of flexibility and diversification, they argue, the "old" citemene method appears especially suitable for a probable future.

I have made similar points about mobility, once seen as a "deviant" form of life, attaining "proletarianization" in a likely future condition (ch. 3 and 4), while the "modern" nucleated urban domesticity has been dismissed as "backward" and "ostensibly backward," yet resonant with modernity (ch. 5). In both cases, the denigrated "hangers on" to the "core" and the sparsely populated "bush" of coexistence would seem to be in no better conditions as anywhere else (Ferguson 1996). The question of the urban poor is not a solved problem, and the rural "bush" is not a failed, marginal "other." Until the urban people in Zambia (and many others in Africa) are not simply stigmatized as "backward" and especially viable alternatives have been found (1991; White 1990), the 1980s more successful.

In all of this, we might well call the "urban" and the "bush" of coexistence as practices in Ferguson's (1996) thought experiment as just as the "mainstream" in Zambia, if they do not disappoint. It is thus possible that the "old" (as Moore and Vaughan describe it) sense of a continuing buildup of new praxis, pattern
method appears especially well suited to the demands of both the present and the probable future.

I have made similar points in my book (Ferguson 1999). Urban/rural labor mobility, once seen as a sign of incomplete or stunted modernity and a failure to attain full proletarianization, today seems better adapted than ever to present and likely future conditions, while the supposed “main line” of permanent urbanization today appears as the anachronism (ch. 2). Likewise, in the domain of urban culture, it is a “old-fashioned” localism that prevails among today’s Copperbelt mineworkers (ch. 3 and 4), while “up-to-date” cosmopolitanism is pressed to the wall (ch. 6). And the “modern” nuclear family that was supposed to represent the inevitable future of urban domesticity is, I have shown, a rare bird, too, surrounded as it is by a range of supposedly backward and pathological domestic strategies that appear better suited to contemporary conditions (ch. 7).

The same spirit, we might wish to reappraise the place of the Copperbelt’s long-diminished “hangers-on”: the unemployed, “useless” lambwaza. These are the heirs to the old Lamba “loafers”: originally, people of the Lamba ethnic group from the sparsely populated rural countryside surrounding the Copperbelt, ethnically stereotyped as lazy and idle (Siegel 1989). The Lamba habit of hanging about the compounds “unproductively” in the early days apparently earned them disdainful descriptions like the following (cited in Rhodesia 1956: 7): “a degraded people on a degraded soil, a race of ‘hangers on,’ inhabiting the midden of the mines, hawkers of minor produce, vice, and the virtue of their women.”

Yet the lambwaza of today—hawks and hangers-on from every ethnic group—would seem to be as “up to date” in their adaptation to contemporary urban conditions as anyone. To say this is not to join in the tendency I have criticized elsewhere (Ferguson 1999: 157–8) of unreservedly celebrating the “coping” abilities of the urban poor and the vitality of the so-called informal sector; such a move can too easily end up whitewashing or romanticizing poverty and unemployment. But neither are we justified in assuming that this often stigmatized group constitutes a failed, marginal class peripheral to the “main line” of a stable working class. For the urban people in this large and diverse category (who appear to have in common only their dependence upon one or another sort of social and economic improvisation) are not simply failures or victims; if anything, they seem to represent an especially viable and durable urban alternative in times like these (cf. MacGaffey 1991; Whie 1990). Some, at least, seemed to be managing the hard times of the late 1980s more successfully than many who had “real jobs.”

In all of this, what emerges is a new respect for what Stephen Jay Gould (1996) would call the “full house” of different urban strategies—that copiously branching “bush” of coexisting variation—and a corresponding revaluation of forms of life that a more linear, progressive narration might consign to the past (see the discussion of Gould’s (1996) variation-centered alternative to teleological evolutionary narratives in Ferguson 1999: 42–3). For the “dead ends” of the past keep coming back, just as the “main lines” that are supposed to lead to the future continually seem to disappoint. It is this that gives the Copperbelt’s recent history its “recessive” quality (as Moore and Vaughan (1994) have remarked for Zambia’s Northern Province), the sense of a continual reiteration of familiar themes, as old and supposedly bygone practices, patterns, and even policies sprout up again when least expected.
A new way of conceptualizing urban life may be emerging in all of this, one that values multiplicity, variation, improvisation, and opportunism and distrusts fixed, unitary modes of practice and linear sequences of phases. For urban Zambians seem to have come, by their own paths, to an understanding at which scholars have recently arrived as well: the realization that global modernity is characterized not by a simple, Eurocentric uniformity but by coexisting and complex sociocultural alternatives (Appadurai 1996), and that the successful negotiation of it may hinge less on mastering a unitary set of “modern” social and cultural forms than on managing to negotiate a dense bush of contemporary variants in the art and struggle of living.

It may also be possible, it has occurred to me, to detect a fundamental mutation in the way that people are coming to talk about historical and economic change in the region. When I have heard Zambians in recent years talk about different parts of Africa, for instance, it seems to me that they no longer speak about this or that place as being ahead or behind, progressing well or too slowly. Instead, people are more likely to speak in terms of nonlinear fluctuations of “up” and “down” (as in “Mozambique is very bad right now, but I hear that Tanzania is coming back up” or “Congo has been down so long, it is bound to come back up soon”), or in terms of particular niches and opportunities that might provide a bit of space here or there. Such usages evoke less the March of Progress than an up-to-date weather report: good times and bad times come and go, the trick is to keep abreast and make the best of it. Postmodernist in a literal sense, this new style of understanding is driven by a pragmatic logic, the need to come to terms with a social world that can no longer be grasped in terms of the old scripts.

Scholars might learn from this example. One might well resist the idea that economic processes are really just like the weather: completely unresponsive to human purposes and beyond the control of human agency. To put matters thus would be to naturalize economic phenomena and to obscure the fact that they are always the products of human activity, always linked to political practices, and always subject to change (Ferguson 1995). But the attempts of ordinary people to map the changes they have been living through in nonlinear, non-teleological ways, and to take seriously the full range of multiplicity and variation in social life, might yet have much to teach us. In political terms, certainly, there would seem to be a compelling need to find new ways of approaching “progressive” politics in an era when the term itself requires to be put in quotation marks. The linear teleologies on which virtually all conventional liberal and leftist political programs have rested simply will not take us very far in dealing with the sorts of challenges raised by the contemporary politics of global inequality, on the Copperbelt or elsewhere.

But to say that received ideas of progress require to be critically interrogated is not to render the pursuit of equality or social improvement antique or laughable. Beyond the celebrations of the postmodern or the end of development lie profoundly challenging issues: how can democratic and egalitarian political movements address the transnational social and economic processes that bypass the control of nation-states as they connect and enrich some regions and social classes, even while they disconnect, impoverish, and abject others (Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Ferguson, forthcoming; Gupta 1998)? How can the responsibility of First-World citizens, organizations, and governments to impoverished and disaster-stricken regions and people be reformulated in a postmodern and humanist style that acknowledges the history and, indeed, guilt of white supremacy and insecurity in an era of hyperintegration? These formidable challenges to this modernist era, and the need to celebrate it. As the project of modernity in the compulsion socioeconomic project, after all, such an event as the neo-World scholars, although it may be as playful as a train set that doesn’t provide solutions to the desires and experiences of the masses, is not necessarily a little too happily, “in the moment,” there may be a sense of globalization of the poor and where the much-vaunted meant an end to the global color bar blockades.

A return to modernity was the hopeful signs of the lull in Africa’s “development” narrative was a development without it. But it isn’t just a simple reproduction of information flows, the historical connectedness of the rest of the world’s success and failure and abject, and abject from the thinking about both.

NOTES

This paper grew out of the recently published book, Exzellent, Zambian Copperbelt, the occasionally one-dimensional, and presented in the body
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These formidable conceptual and political problems must be faced at the end of this modernist era, as much by those who lament its passing as by those who celebrate it. As the people of the Copperbelt know only too well, the unending project of modernity is not a playful intellectual choice but a shattering, compulsory socioeconomic event. While the intellectual consequences are profound for all, such an event affects Copperbelt workers far more directly than it does First-World scholars; viewed from the vantage point of the Copperbelt, it is about as playful as a train wreck. That the view from the Copperbelt is so different from that available from the academy gives it no automatic privilege; certainly no magic solutions to the daunting questions and problems listed here emerge from the experience of the men and women who saw the “industrial revolution” come and go within the span of a single lifetime. But at a time when First-World academics are wont to speak perhaps a little too confidently of globalization or postmodernity, and a little too happily about “the demise of metanarratives” or “the end of development,” there may be something to be gained from contemplating a place where the globalization of the economy has been experienced as disconnection and abjection, and where the much-celebrated end of the universalizing project of modernity has meant an end to the prospect of African equality, and the re-establishment of a global color bar blocking access from the “first-class” world.

A return to modernist teleology, a new grand narrative that would trace the hopeful signs of an Africa once more “emerging” out of the gloomy ashes of Africa’s “development” disaster is neither plausible nor desirable. The modernization narrative was always a myth, an illusion, often even a lie. We should all learn to do without it. But if the academic rejection of modernization and development is not simply to reproduce at another level the global disconnects of capital, migration, and information flows, we must replace it with other ways of conceiving the relations of historical connectedness and ethical and political responsibility that link Africa and the rest of the world. If the people who have, in good faith, lived out the agonizing, failed plotline of development and modernization are not to be simply disconnected and abjected from the new world order, it will be necessary to find new ways of thinking about both progress and responsibility in the aftermath of modernism.

NOTES

This paper grew out of a talk that presented some of the major conclusions of a previously published book, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (University of California Press, 1999). I hope that the reader will forgive the occasionally oral style, and the fact that the argument refers to ethnographic material presented in the body of the monograph and not in the paper itself.
1 Hannerz (1996) has made a similar suggestion regarding the pursuit of international popular culture by black artists and intellectuals in the Sophiatown district of Johannesburg in the 1950s.

2 After a 1920 meeting, H. G. Wells reported that “Lenin, who like a good orthodox Marxist denounces all ‘Utopias’, has succumbed at last to a Utopia, the Utopia of the electricians” (Coopersmith 1992: 154).

3 I do not suggest that the reduction in the amount of copper used in communication technology is the major factor here; it is clearly but one among a number of factors leading to the decline of the copper industry in Zambia. I mention the association only as a way of pointing out some of the ironies associated with the apparently universal process of globalization.

4 The figure (obviously to be taken with a grain of salt, given the absence of direct evidence) appeared in Harper’s (1997).

5 In addition to the authors discussed here, see Escobar’s important study (1995), which also heralds a “post-development era,” as well as the recent The Post-Development Reader (Rahnema 1997); see also Margin and Margin 1990 and Nandy 1988.

6 For the “original affluent society” essay, see Sahlin 1972. For a telling critique, see Wilmson 1989.

7 Through such ironic reinscriptions of modernist teleology, the contemporary necessity of having to come to terms with the breakdown of modernism (i.e., post-modernism (an aftermath of modernism)) is routinely transmuted into a new evolutionary epoch (post-modernity, the next rung on the ladder) with its own “up-to-dare” worldview (“Postmodernism,” a suitable “latest thing” for the final chapter of the social theory textbook, and, indeed, its own triumphalist metanarrative of emergence.

8 Debra Spitalnik has suggested (personal communication) that the word lambuwaza probably derives from the stem Lamba, in combination with the French ois, which is both a normal French word ending (as in chinois, bourgeois, etc.) and a French morpheme connoting idleness and laziness (as in oiseaux (idle, pointless, useless) and oisif (idle, unemployed)). If this is correct, lambuwaza would have an original meaning linked both to a specific ethnic group (the Lamba) and to a trait stereotypically associated with that group (“laziness”). In my fieldwork, however, I did not note any special relation between the Lambas and the term lambuwaza, which referred to any unemployed youth “hanging around” the city.

9 I cannot say more about this interesting group, as I did not study them in any systematic way (perhaps because I, too, carried in my head assumptions about main lines and incidental peripheries).

10 Compare the deliberately “recursive” exposition, particularly in dealing with the legacies of the RLI, in Ferguson 1999.

11 Such a naturalization of the logic of a “complex system” occurs in the uses of “complexity theory” by economists, as shown in Maurer’s critical review (1995).

12 I speak of First-World scholars here, because Zambian scholars, unfortunately, have experienced the economic crisis I have described here only too directly. One of the most vivid illustrations (at least for an academic) of the abjection and disconnection that I have tried to describe can be seen by visiting the University of Zambia library. Once a fine university library that could adequately support serious research in a range of fields, it resembled (at least when I last saw it) a kind of sad museum, with virtually no recent books or current periodical subscriptions at all. Salaries for university lecturers in Zambia, meanwhile, had by 1989 dropped so low that only by taking second and third jobs, and/or resorting to subsistence farming, were lecturers able to sustain themselves.

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