Coming to Terms with the Famine and Food Question in Ethiopia

A Review of Rahmato Dessalegn, *Famine and Survival Strategies*, Uppsala, The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1991, 246 pages

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The book is no doubt another effort to come to terms with the recurring famine in Ethiopia and to contribute towards evolving a durable solution. Indeed as Rahmato argues, food aid of the magnitude witnessed during the 1984/85 famine can not be a solution but a complement to the peoples' effort to avert the scourge of famine. Thus the main concern of Rahmato's book is the examination of the strategies peasants have been adopting in the face of famine (p.15). Put differently, "What do peasants do in the face of severe food crisis and ecological stress and how do they manage to survive on their own, if ever they do?"

The book is divided into 10 chapters. In chapter one the objectives and the theoretical thrust of the study are spelt out. In chapter two, the organization of the book is outlined. Chapter 3 dwells on the ecological and geographical setting of Wollo and Ambassel, the areas from which most of the empirical evidence used in the study was collected. Chapter 4 describes the features of the economy in the study areas. In chapter 5 the production system of peasants, what the author calls the "peasant mode of production" is described. Chapter 6 describes the 1984/85 famine situation in Wollo. Chapter 7 and 8 highlights what peasants do in anticipation of, and during, famine. Chapter 9 deals with post-famine recovery and chapter 10 revisits theories on the causes of famine and offers solutions to famine in Ethiopia.

The book is very rich in empirical evidence, which demonstrates the level to which the author went searching for the "mystery" behind the famine that hides behind the Ethiopian mountains. One can not but be impressed by the authors field experience which allows him to be sensitive to minute details. At the same time, the book is important because of the approach he employed. For long studies on issues of agricultural stagnation/development have treated the peasantry as objects and not subjects of history. Peasants were, so to speak, a sack of potatoes, the sort of impression Marx once painted. The author makes his point that the search for solutions to recurring famine must begin with the victims. We need to understand their capabilities, potentials and weaknesses. However, the data/information,

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collected so painstakingly, could have enhanced the stature of the study if some methodological, conceptual and theoretical issues had been critically addressed.

Contextualizing Famines and Peasant Responses

The author correctly observes that "famine has occurred in a large variety of historical, political, economic and ecological contexts" (p.215). But he does not put the 1984/85 famine into historical and contemporary contexts. For to appreciate the distinctiveness of one famine from another requires a historical analysis of the social, economic and political structures of the Ethiopian society. The question is "what makes the 1984/85 famine distinctively different from that of 1973/74 or even those that had occurred much earlier?" Were the responses of peasants and the innovations they undertook to confront the famine the same as in the earlier period? What aspects of the survival strategies were applicable in past famines and which ones are no longer applicable?

The author correctly critiques the "Capitalist development school" (p.212) for giving impressions that famines are caused by external forces and absolving the "internal and intrinsic social forces and political and economic structures". This, however, does not mean that external forces can be ignored. If anything the analysis must integrate both the internal and external forces to highlight how the interplay of these factors contribute to famine. While it is true that Ethiopian society was never colonized (p.215), it non the less never remained isolated from the world capitalist system. The author argues that peasants in Wollo are subsistence farmers who do not produce for the world market (p.58). According to the author, this fact implies that they are not integrated into the national and international markets. Yet a careful reading of the book reveals evidence to the contrary. What this evidence shows is that Wollo has been integrated in the national and international economies as a labour and cattle reserve. Before the 1974 revolution:

> *Every year tens of thousands of peasants from Wollo would migrate to the large modern plantations and to the coffee growing areas in pursuit of economic gains" (p.146). ... "among the major sources of seasonal employment for Wollo peasants were the two giant agricultural schemes on the eastern and north-western lowlands of the country, namely the cotton plantations of the Awash Valley, and the sesame seed farm enterprises in the Setit Humera region. Cossins has estimated that some 20,000 Wollo peasants were annually employed as seasonal labourers in the farms in the Delta of the Awash river; there were also a large number of them working in the Humera area, and in south-western Ethiopia in the early 1970s. In an earlier work I estimated that the Awash Valley and the Humera enterprises employed over a quarter of a million permanent and temporary workers originating from outside the*

> *regions in the same period, and about one third of these, i.e. 70,000 to 80,000, were from Wollo. In the Awash Valley in particular, Wollo peasants were employed as "outgrowers" which involved raising crops on rented land to sell to the large plantations on contractual basis" (p.146).*

Definitely some of the crops such as coffee, cultivated by migrants from Wollo, were exported to the world market. In the text, the author praises the livestock potential in Wollo. Later he intimates that cheap cattle from Wollo finds its way into the urban centres and beyond the borders of Ethiopia. Shoa and Wollo merchants smuggle it to Sudan, Djibouti, Kenya and Somalia (p.180) or even to the Middle East. This trade may not simply be occasional when there is famine in Wollo but also during the non famine times. Finally Wollo peasants do consume imported products - soap, paraffin, etc. What this evidence indicates is the fact that Wollo is very much integrated into the world market. This integration continued even after the 1974 revolution when wage labour was substituted for forced/conscript labour. And what is interesting about our observation is the fact that the experience of Wollo is similar to the experiences of labour/cattle economies else where in Africa. The similarities can be gleaned from the history of labour reserves in settler Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa or even non-settler countries such as Uganda. What is common to these reserves is recurring famine, food shortages, malnutrition, over-population and environmental degradation. Historically in Africa all areas that were integrated as labour/cattle reserves have been victims of recurring famine! Perhaps we would draw some lessons.

The reality of cash crop and labour/cattle reserves in Ethiopia points to another set of issues regarding capitalist development after the Ethiopian revolution of 1974. The author argues:

> *So much has been written about rural class formation in Africa that the subject needs to be carefully re-examined, and some of the sound and fury regarding the alleged capitalist offence in the African countryside be given the burial it deserves (p.23)*

Was capitalism shattered by the so-called "socialist" regime of Mengistu? (p.24). This question can be interpreted on the basis of a number of assumptions that the pre-revolution Ethiopian society was capitalist which it was not and the author demonstrates his awareness by enclosing the world capitalism in inverted commas. Though pre-revolution Ethiopia was not a capitalist system it non the less experienced a capitalist development. At the same time it would be totally erroneous to say capitalist development was arrested after the 1974 "revolution". It is certainly a mistake on the part of many scholars to assume that any country can become "Marxist" or "socialist" through simple proclamations that Tanzania or Ethiopia, Kenya,

Uganda, etc., is "socialist". The failure to see through labels has been one of the problems many academics have faced when confronted with crises in countries that described themselves as socialist (e.g. Nyerere's Tanzania, Mengistu's Ethiopia, etc.) or the recent crisis in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. It must be acknowledged that Ethiopian society is neither capitalist nor socialist. Yet one is persuaded, on the basis of the evidence in the book, that capitalist development continued even after the "socialist" revolution with its usual characteristics of uneven development among regions, sectors, etc. It is clear from the book that the regional imbalances created before the revolution still continued after the 1974 "revolution". Wollo continued to play the role of a labour and cattle reserve for both the national and international markets. The uneven development manifests itself as before, the south as a plantation zone and Wollo as a supplier of cheap labour and cattle.

Another fact of capitalist development can be discerned from the ongoing social differentiation among the peasantry even in the "socialist" context. To this we add the fact that features such as g'it'ir (child contracting), contract farming, etc, are characteristics of early phases of capitalist development, emerging via pre-capitalist relations and state policies. It may be that the development of a wage labouring class is not marched with a corresponding development of a capitalist class in Wollo or the surplus is not being re-invested in the rural areas, but this labour is becoming an important phenomenon. This labour is the one working in the south or simply migrating to the "urban areas and become part of the urban unemployed (p.25) or join the fighting groups". This means that "capitalism" was after all not shattered in Ethiopia and will remain for years to come.

While the author does not deal with the nature of Wollo's integration into the world market, he at the same time does not bring out the social basis of the Ethiopian state. To be sure, the reader glimpses, here and there in the text, the forms and extent of surplus extraction by the state - "corvee" labour for military and other "communal" needs (p.99, p.147, p.206), the disruptive nature of the fighting and resettlement schemes (p.105 and p.205), grain quotas, the absurd prices offered to peasants (p.95), etc.,. One however, does not clearly grasp the social and economic structures of Ethiopia and how they reproduce famine in Ethiopia. Unless one understands the social classes that define the character of the Ethiopian state, it is impossible to evolve programmes for liberating peasants. It is unfortunate that the author dismisses the discussion of the state as being outside the scope of his study (p.217).

Peasant Class, Differentiation and Famine

The author rightly treats the peasants as a single class, although, through a process of social differentiation, it is split up into different stratums. The

author is right in arguing that there is a certain amount of confusion regarding "rural class formation" and "exploitation". Therefore, he correctly notes that as long as one considers the peasantry as a class, then there can never be exploitation internal to that class. I also share the same sentiments as far as the names we give these stratums - poor peasants, middle peasants and rich peasants. Many students of African peasantries are not satisfied with these terminologies. Indeed, it goes without saying that there is need to develop concepts that appropriately fit the content we endeavor to describe.

The author, however, does not convincingly tell us the criterion used to identify or categorize peasant stratums or classes in Ethiopia. How does one determine that such and such a household is lower, middle, or upper peasant? What makes the middle peasant self-supporting and what makes other stratums not self supporting? (p.25). Earlier on the author defined a poor peasant (lower peasantry) as one "who does not have sufficient labour or traction power" (p.21). Does this imply that the middle peasant is self-supporting in terms of labour and traction power? If family labour and traction power is the criterion, the logic ceases to apply when it comes to "upper" peasants. For when it comes to this strata the author gives an impression that "upper" peasants are self-supporting in labour and livestock but have more labour and traction power than others! If he rents out what would distinguish this upper peasant from a middle peasant who also rents our oxen? What complicates everything is that he dismisses the concept "rich" peasant without explaining what is so offensive in the usage and what is better about the concept "upper" peasant. The point is, if family labour and traction power is the criterion for determining the various peasant stratums, how many family people and how many oxen define a particular household to be lower, middle or upper peasants? What are the cut off numbers for each class? And by the way, having chosen his descriptive names (lower, middle and upper peasants) for the peasant stratums, the author does not employ them consistently. For example, he decries the usage of the concept "rich peasants" and indeed he is careful in the book not to use it. But he extensively employs the concept "poor peasants". Now, in a society where you have poor peasants, there must be rich peasants too!

In the discourse over peasant differentiation in Africa this problem has often been overcome by defining what one understands to be a certain peasant stratum. Though implements, the size of land and the number of oxen do help in determining the position of a given household, the crucial variable is the labour used predominantly in production - family, communal or wage labour. A poor or lower peasantry is one who derives much of his/her livelihood from using family labour and also selling labour to upper or rich peasants or plantations. Usually such a household is deficient in instruments of production of land. What makes a middle peasant self-supporting is the self reliance in terms of labour. Rarely does a middle peasant sell

or hire labour. The upper peasant derives most of his/her livelihood from partly using family labour and partly hiring the labour of the poor peasants or wage labourers. The author misses the point by assuming that the fact that "upper" peasants hire relatives and do not pay wages in the form of cash, means that "upper" peasants do not engage in wage labour. He says:

> *Degga peasants, especially if they happen not to be blessed with sufficient land and/or sufficient traction power hire themselves out (mainly) Woyna-Degga peasants, i.e. those with large enough holdings as labourers during weeding and harvesting; if payment is involved it is almost always in kind. The practice of hiring labour for a cash wage is virtually unknown. Often, enough in fact, a good number of peasants who work as temporary hands are related by blood, marriage or religious convention to the owner of the farm, and may be working for him not for immediate remuneration but for a favour to be received at a future date (p.80).*

Precisely, in early phases of capitalist development, payments take the form of kind and gradually assuming cash forms. In addition, in these early phases of capitalist development, rich peasants begin their accumulation by laying claims on the pre-capitalists relations and ethics of co-operation. Capitalist development is a process which initially adapts to pre-capitalist relations. It does not just drop from the sky. As the process continues, the rich peasants may translate themselves into capitalists, depending entirely on wage labour, whether of relatives or non relatives. We should add that upper peasants also invest in trade; they are potential merchants of tomorrow.

The issue of identifying and determining classes becomes crucial when it comes to the wage-labouring class. This is a group the author calls the marginalized peasants who often have no land of their own and earn their livelihood by providing labour. This raises two interrelated problems, one methodological and the other conceptual.

The author says that it was difficult statistically to identify this class. This is no doubt due to the fact that the author could not see through the pre-capitalist relations and secondly, due to the defects in the methodology he employed to collect data. Let us look at his methodology.

Rahmato says that in their estimate 50% of the peasantry belonged to the lower peasantry, 40% to middle stratum and 10% in the upper stratum (p.25) with the "labouring" group collapsed in the lower peasantry. How did they arrive at these figures, the author says by indirect evidence! (p.25). Furthermore, the questionnaires, the author says, "were meant to be put to peasants who had at varying degrees personally experienced the 1984/85 famine. Those peasants whose communities had escaped disaster "... were not selected for the interview" (p.36). It is possible, then, that land labourers were excluded from the interviews since they could have migrated to the

southern plantations at the time of the famine! It is even possible some were still in the south working for a wage or they had joined the fighting groups. A methodology that focuses on the household is, however, capable of discerning the labourer class as a distinct social group from the peasantry. We shall later show how the administering of the questionnaire only to famine victims led to another error - that peasants were engaged in survival strategies and no accumulation strategies during the 1984/85 famine.

Furthermore, if it was difficult to identify statistically the land labourers class, then conceptually the author should tell us what this category is, whether it is likely to expand or not, and the implications for rural production, survival and accumulation strategies. In addition, we would be interested in understanding the relationship between this class and the fighting groups in Ethiopia. For ultimately, we know that wars have contributed to rural instability, less production and famine. Could it be that this class has been recruiting ground for the fighting groups, especially those who can not get employment? Rahmato says that the "upper" peasantry do not exploit and has no contradictions with other peasant categories. We have already noted that there is no exploitation internal to the peasantry. But this does not mean that there is no "surplus" transfer and no contradictions among the various peasant strata. The author argues that peasants interact with each other for mutual benefit. This, automatically, nullifies the fact of differentiation. For example, he gives an example of poor peasants in Ambassel awraja who, without draught animals, rent out their land to the "prosperous" ones. That the renter agrees to farm the land and after harvest a portion is given to the owner of the land. That this example shows that both sides benefit and in fact it is the poor peasant who appropriates the labour of the prosperous one (p.26). Obviously this example is not convincing, unless Rahmato can show how much the market rate of rent is, the price of seeds, the market rates for weeding, harvesting and threshing as against the value of the total harvest and how it is distributed!

Let us look at the data in the book. The author does demonstrate that draught power in Ambassel is not evenly distributed. Five percent of the population own more than 2 oxen, 35% own 2 oxen, 40% one ox, and 20% no ox (p.74). Because of this uneven distribution of oxen, a variety of relationships develop. There is *Mengenajut*, a practice where peasants with one ox each team and work together in turns. No fee or remuneration is involved. *Mengenajut* is a communal practice which can indeed be said to lead to mutual benefit. *Mengenajut*, however, is different from the most common practice of renting farm animals in Ambassel - *Wonfel* (p.74). *Wonfel* is a practice where someone rents oxen in exchange for labour. The one who hires the oxen is supposed to work two days on the farm of the owner of the oxen for every one day he/she ploughs his/her field. This clearly leads to inequalities at the end of the day. The one hiring will be one step behind

the owner of the oxen. He will not adequately time the season and the result is that while the owner of the farm has more yield the one hiring will have less. If this kind of dependence continues, the one hiring will be in a vicious cycle that gradually leads him/her to impoverishment. Thus all forms of rent - labour rent (*Wonfel*), Commodity rents (*chinnet*), etc., - lead to surplus transfer within the peasantry class and indeed have potentials for breeding conflict and watering down the ideology of community sense of belonging and co-operation.

This leads us to the concept of "peasant mode of production". This phrase has been very contentious in scholarly circles. It is a phrase that was widely employed by the "articulation of modes" school of thought to show that the underdevelopment of African societies was due to the penetration of monopoly capital. The penetration did not result in a fully fledged capitalist "mode of production". Instead, that penetration preserved the "peasant mode of production" co-existing with the "capitalist mode", with the latter as the dominant. We shall not belabour the critique against this school. Suffice to point out that if peasants are differentiating into various strata, with unequal access to productive resources (land, labour, oxen, etc.,) and in turn this translating into various forms or practices of production, is it possible to talk of a single "peasant mode of production"? The author rightly argues that peasants live in a variety of ecological, historical, political and economic contexts. These contexts vary with time and define the nature of social differentiation and forms of production of each peasant stratum. This means that the usage of a "peasant mode of production" is inappropriate if not irrelevant! Indeed the evidence in the book leads one to think that after all we should be talking of the different peasant forms of production and not a "peasant mode of production".

This also goes for the concept "peasant survival strategies". The data in the book show clearly that there are inequalities in access to land, instruments of production (ploughs), drought animals and also there are variations in the demographic composition of the households. These factors acting in concert with demands of the state (conscript labour, forced labour, forced sales) and environmental degradation do influence the decisions about what crops to grow and the timing. Inequalities in access to productive resources are in turn translated into unequal harvests. Those disadvantaged in terms of productive resources will be more vulnerable to famine because there will be less grain in the *goudguad*. On the other hand, those with better productive resources will have more grain. To the extent that when drought strikes, the survival strategies of the two categories will be different. If anything, the one with more food will not simply be adopting survival, but also accumulation strategies! Yet the author does not see accumulation strategies of certain peasants because of the assumption over the nature of peasant participation in the market and secondly the methodology which only allowed him to

administer the questionnaires to the victims and nothing to the beneficiaries! One indeed is reminded of Mamdani's famous statement about the Sahel famine of the 1970's. This was a story of a thin man and a fat man. "Said the fat man to the thin man, 'you should be ashamed of yourself. If someone visiting the country saw you before anyone else he would think there was famine here'. Replied the thin man, 'if he saw you next he would know the reason for that famine'.[1] In any famine situation there are losers and beneficiaries. A realistic and comprehensive analysis of the famine situation in Wollo would require that the questionnaire be administered to both the victims and beneficiaries of the famine. This shortcoming may explain why the issue of peasant differentiation is not adequately handled in the book and why there is a mistake of assuming that there can be something such as "peasant survival strategies" and nothing like accumulation strategies. It follows that the vulnerable strata are the most poor and these have everything to gain by emphasizing the traditional morals or pulling efforts to survive. On the other hand the upper peasants always welcome such situations as an opportunity:

> *Peasants who took advantage of the behaviour of the market during the crisis and engaged in vigorous commercial activity... What they did was to buy one product in one market and sell it for profit at another, trade in high price products, especially grain or buy livestock cheaply and keep them out of the famine zone for the duration of the crisis (p.200).*

In fact the author acknowledges that the new middle and upper strata are products of vagaries of the weather and of economic activity during the famine (p.198). What the author does is to argue that what ultimately matters is not the transfer of "surplus" from one peasant stratum to another; that is an inter-peasant affair! According to the author, what mattered was that the "surplus" remained in the rural areas! Yet cattle bought at distress sales were smuggled out of the country or remained in other regions despite the persuasion that most of it came back. Indeed, one wonders how much of the surplus remained in the rural areas.

Even if one were to accept that such a thing as "peasant survival strategies" existed, one would still want to believe that such "strategies" were based on circumstances specific to that period. History does not repeat itself except that similar aspects from history may recur. It is not possible to talk of a particular set of "peasant survival strategies" across history. Similarly, those who have drawn up models for survival strategies have forgotten that peasants are constantly differentiating and that alters the

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1 Mamdani, Mahmood, "Disaster Prevention: Defining the Problem", in Publication of the Council for Human Rights in Uganda (CURE) West Germany, May, 1986.

strategies they adopt during crises. For differentiation, understood in the specific circumstances operating in the wider context, keep on altering the material and cultural bases of the society. In this sense one fails to see, "the co-operative ethic which informs all aspects of peasant life is grounded on reciprocal support and transactive of mutual benefit" (p.159) [emphasis added].

The peasant-state relationships do come out in focus in the book. Recognition of the negative role of the state leads the author to suggest that the free forces of the market should be left to operate. It is fashionable these days of structural adjustment to argue that the interventionist role of the state should be minimized for agricultural production to pick-up. This recommendation is based on the conviction that state intervention reduces peasant incomes and renders peasants incapable of agricultural innovation and expanded production. The solution is to roll back the state to allow market forces to operate. No one can deny, after reading this book, that the state has been plundering peasant surplus. But the call for a free market, as the author does, is equally fallacious. For the market historically develops as part and parcel of the commodity production and class formation. Ultimately, the role of the market will be positive or negative depending on the class character of the market. For tomorrow we may have starvation amidst plenty!

The Food Question: What is to be done?

The author makes a point that we should not offer blue prints. We need solutions that arise from the concrete understanding of the societies we are dealing with. Furthermore, there is no single factor that explains the recurrence of famines, either in Ethiopia or elsewhere.

The most important point to be observed, as far as his policy prescriptions are concerned, is that they are cast in a technistic mold. Some of the insights that come out from the book are not used in making suggestions. For example, the author talks of food conservation, reduction of the pre and post-harvest losses, soil conservation, drought resistant seeds, famine crops, emergency seed bank, strategic food and livestock reserve, creation of "permanent food emergency zones" and relieving those below poverty line of taxes (p.219-224). Who will do these things? The author says that the state should do it! Surely the same state that concealed information about the starving millions is now being asked to undertake policy reform? In addition to this, the data presented earlier shows that "private grain merchants who charged exorbitant prices greatly benefited by the obstructive policies of local officialdom in both 1972 and 1973... Food sent to starving areas was not redistributed to the needy but sold to private merchants..." (p.102). Who is going to change the attitude of the greedy "local officialdom"? In any case, how are we to be sure that the state, as a matter of fact, did not

deliberately cause famines in the rural areas to break the backs of the resistant peasants?

The point is that famine and food issues are political questions. There is no way one can introduce reforms the market or technical innovations or transform the productive powers of the peasants without first solving the political question. It is not enough to say that the task of feeding the cities be left to "grain merchants and private endeavor" (p.224). Have we so soon forgotten how the rice question led to the massacre of Tolbert of Liberia? In other words, which social classes will be the agency of transformation, or resolve the food question?

Rahmato has set the pace by bringing to light as much empirical facts as he could get. He has given us a basis for further reflection on this burning question of our time. We welcome the contribution. We should build on it.