# In Search of an Explanation for the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974

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**Haile Selassie, Western Education and Political Revolution in Ethiopia**
by Paulos Milkias
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Ethiopia had more than its due share of wars and social turbulence through most of the known periods of its long history (upwards of two thousand years). Perhaps only one century (the 16th) compares with the 20th for the extent and intensity of the external and internal wars that the country fought, the population displacements and movements, and the massive destructions of property and national heritage. A considerable proportion of this turbulence and these wars were generated by a veritable and bloody social revolution that scholars have compared with the great social revolutions of the world – the French, the Russian and the Chinese.[1] It is argued that social revolutions are rare phenomena in world history and that they are even rarer in the African context. It is therefore a matter of great intellectual importance to explain this phenomenon when it occurred in Ethiopia.

The revolutionary intellectuals did not by any means find it difficult to 'understand' it or to account for it. They saw a feudal monarchy in the kingship of Haile Selassie, a feudal nobility in the ruling class of the country, a subject peasantry in the rural producers akin to the French or the Russian ones before their respective revolutions, the petty bourgeoisie in the social group of teachers and students who agitated for the coming of the revolution and then provided the cadre (or the rebels) when it came. They characterised the country as backward, the economy as stagnant and the regime as oppressive. Thus, they concluded that this was a classic case of feudal oppression leading to revolution. This summary may sound like a caricature but it carries the essential arguments.[2] The military government, which very quickly assumed the revolutionary mantle, went on to embrace the Marxist Leninist ideology and launched a massive propaganda that offered the above explanation, albeit in a much cruder form, to the people.

Yet, the reality was much more complex. Ethiopia underwent impressive changes during the reign of Haile Selassie, particularly after the restoration of imperial rule in 1941, following the five year occupation by Fascist Italian forces. These transformations profoundly affected most aspects of national life. The subsequent three decades witnessed a period of relative peace. A modern state machinery was built up; the foundations for the modern sectors of the economy were laid down; the infrastructure (roads, air transport, health stations and hospitals, schools) was developed. Given the limited resources that the state had at its disposal, the achievements were remarkable. For instance, the GDP grew between 4 and 4.5 % for most of the1950s and 60s. Though not high, it was considered a decent rate of growth. In any case, it was slightly higher than the Sub-Saharan average for the period. According to the World Bank, 'The economic growth rates in the region [Sub-Saharan Africa] during 1960-75 averaged about 4 percent a year… Agriculture did poorly in this period with annual rates of increase averaging only about 1.5 percent.'[3] In contrast to this general picture, Ethiopian agriculture did not do badly. Shiferaw Jamo, a respected senior Ethiopian economist, writes that 'During the decade of the 1950s, agricultural value added increased at an annual average rate of about 2%. This was only marginally higher than the estimated population growth rate of 1.6% a year. In the 1960s, agricultural value added increased at an annual average rate of about 2.2% …'[4] This would not compare badly with the estimated population growth rate for the decade. The growth rate started to fall sharply in this sector (falling to 1.4%) at the turn of the 1970s.[5] On the other hand, some of the other sectors underwent fast growth. According to a government report, the manufacturing sector registered no less than 16% annual growth during the Second Five Year Plan period (1963 -1968).[6] In the services sector, education expanded at an average growth rate that oscillated between 15 and 16% from liberation to revolution.[7] This rapid growth rate gave rise to new social groups (labour, intellectuals, the unemployed, the homeless, etc.) who had new political perceptions and demands.

Seen against the background of the country, however, these transformations had major long term and negative consequences. The peace factor and the expansion of the economy, together with the modest efforts of the imperial government to control and eradicate killer diseases and to introduce clinics and hospitals around the country, led to an increasingly high population growth. In 1941, Ethiopia had an estimated population of seventeen million. In the following three decades, this figure almost doubled to reach thirty million in 1971.[8] More remarkable (and frightening) was the fact that the rate of growth itself rose dramatically from 1.5% in the early 1940s to 2.1% in the late 1950s and to 2.3% in the 1960s.[9] If this growth rate for the country as a whole was considered very high, the annual growth rate for the urban population would have to be regarded as extraordinary – 3.5% from 1938 to 1967 and 7.1% for the years immediately before the revolution.[10]

This leads us to the paradoxical conclusion that the background to the revolution saw years of economic and infrastructural expansion (much like the classic French case), which, however, generated population growth far beyond the capacity of the economy to feed, to house and to clothe. Urban poverty was born. The countryside coped with the problem by sharing its resources, with the attendant fragmentation of land. But, the urban centres, particularly the major ones (Addis Ababa, Asmara, Dire Dawa, Harar etc.), could not handle the rising demand for jobs, housing, schools and other services. Thus, by the turn of the 1970s, the big towns, particularly Addis Ababa, had become combustible material for revolution. On the other hand, the state had not developed the capacity to decisively address all these very new (or modern) problems.

In his later years (and after his demise), Haile Selassie was blamed as much for the wrong reasons as for the right ones. One of the principal projects of his career as 'king of kings', for which he should not have been subjected to severe criticism, was his centralisation drive. Seen against the background of the age-old political system, centralisation could not but be seen as a very progressive and positive policy. There was no way a modern state could be built if the old regional ruling houses and nobilities were allowed to continue with their traditional autonomy. 'International pressure' in the 1920s focused, among other things, on the call for the reduction of the powers and privileges of the regional lords.[11] The intellectuals of the early decades of this century also articulated this 'reform' in their writings.[12] This demand fitted in with the interests of the young monarch, who made considerable efforts to introduce centralisation, which in turn facilitated his project of building a westernized state.[13] Yet, like the other westernization policies, the end result turned out to be very damaging to the interests of the very man (and class) who built up a centralized monarchical regime.

Recent evidence show how much the emperor was a bottleneck for government decision-making in his later years. His capacities as a person, his memory, his energy, all declined in the years that led up to the Revolution. Yet, he continued to intervene in the day-to-day activities of ministers, provincial governors and divisional commanders, let alone of the prime minister. It was common for decisions taken by any one of these authorities to be reversed by the emperor. The most eloquent testimony has come from Ahadu Sabure, Minister of Information in the Endalkachew Mekonnen cabinet (February-July 1974), who details how the monarch interfered in his work.[14] That an emperor who was growing senile was allowed to stay at the helm of power and to mismanage the country can also be seen as a manifestation of the decay of the ruling elite. In the Court, aging courtiers, out of touch with the country's fast-changing realities, were busy in the age-old traditional intrigues of promoting their factional interests (succession to the throne, ministerial positions, etc.) until it was too late. By a supreme irony of history, the emperor's actions (together with the decay of the ruling class) brought about the paralysis of his own government. Whar role this played in making the revolution possible is a major theme for future research. Yet, no effort at explaining the revolution could succeed without taking into account the paralysis of the central institutions of the state at the time of the outbreak of the revolution.

Long ago, political scientists pointed out the structural weakness of the state, which contributed to its collapse in 1974 possible.[15] A major feature of this weakness was the failure to introduce a political party which would have enabled the rulers to mobilize the people when the need arose. In the absence of the traditional institutions of political mobilization, there was no organisational intermediary between the rulers and the ruled. If I may bring in a personal observation, I would like to draw attention to the campuses of the only national university of the country (Haile Selassie I University, automatically rechristened during the revolution as Addis Ababa University). Radical students enjoyed a complete domination of the political space on the university campuses before the revolution for two reasons – firstly because imperial rule was benevolent and secondly because there was no ruling party or, for that matter, any other party to contest their domination. The state could only send its secret agents to spy on student activities. But these agents could not deliver much because the leftists easily smelled out newcomers, who did not in any case look like student types. After the outbreak of the revolution, however, student militants (opposed to the junta) found out that the campus was no longer a place that they could dominate because some of the radical groups had decided to ally with the military. In a very short time, the soldiers could effectively control students and faculty with the help and support of student and staff party members, respectively. These party activists exercised enormous power due to the overwhelming presence of the state that loomed behind them.

Given the critical significance of a ruling party, why (we may ask) did the imperial government fail to build it up? This question will help us to gain insight into some of the problematics of the imperial state. We readily use the expression that Haile Selassie built up a modern state. This is true up to a point.[16] But it obscures the fact that the process of modernization (I prefer the notion of westernization) was not yet completed at the time of the outbreak of the revolution. Thus, there is a need to see the state as a fledgling westernising state, which was caught unawares by the revolution. Perhaps this factor would guide us in the effort to explain why the army, which had been established in the first place to protect the imperial order, ultimately spearheaded the movement to demolish it.

Yet, the army's role in the revolution of 1974 was not the only paradox that confronts the historian. The intellectuals and the university students provide the other case. Paulos Milkias proposes precisely to look into the role of this social group. The theme of his book, in his own words, is to

> … explore the role of education as an important variable in the socio-political transformation of Ethiopia which culminated in the far-reaching revolutionary upheaval of1974.
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> … The research was conducted with some basic assumptions in mind. One of the guiding presuppositions was that the intelligentsia's perception of their own status is crucial for an understanding of the root causes of social upheavals. (pp.18-19)

The author devotes a fairly sizeable book to develop his theme. The book is divided into fourteen chapters and has a rather big postscript. They can however be grouped into four parts – the first section consists of chapter two only. It is a long but useful summary of the theoretical literature on social revolutions. We will come back to it later when we analyse the revolution on the basis of the data furnished by the book. The next group of chapters (two and three) present the development of modern education in Ethiopia from 1941 to 1974. Then the author moves on to chapters 6 to 9 to reconstruct the history of what is now unanimously called - both in the historical literature and among the public - the Ethiopian Student Movement (for some inexplicable reason, the author does not use this term very much). The narrative goes on until it reaches the climax, the outbreak of the revolution in February 1974. The author devotes the next four chapters (10 to 13) to the seven revolutionary months (18 February to 12 September), taking his story up to the deposition of Haile Selassie on 12 September. This is by far the meatiest part of the work.

This book is a very welcome addition to the not-so-rich literature on the Ethiopian revolution of 1974. It is very gratifying to see that Ethiopian scholars are beginning to undertake a sustained reflection on a major social phenomenon in the contemporary his-

tory of the country. Paulos directs our attention to a very important group whose role is often taken for granted but never subjected to a critical investigation. In the global literature on revolutions, intellectuals are given primacy of place; in fact, Brinton, the noted theorist, identifies the desertion of the system by the educated elites as one of the commonalities in the revolutions of the world (cited in the book under review, p.14). Again and again, the author underlines the decisive role of the educated elites (sometimes he calls them intelligentsia) and the need to study their place in social change (pp. 14, 20, 24, 27). In this book, he draws not only from the secondary literature but also from interviews and responses to questionnaires. He uses to good effect government publications as well as agitational flyers and pamphlets distributed during the revolution. He also occasionally brings in his own observations as an activist student. All of this has enabled him to weave together an interesting account of the revolution from February to September 1974. In general, he has written a thought-provoking analysis of the role of university students and young intellectuals in Ethiopia's greatest social upheaval of the last century.

There are several issues in the book that trigger debate and discussion. His efforts to characterize the 'intelligentsia' as the most decisive factor for the outbreak of the revolution and for its success leads him to overlook (and even to reject) other important variables that made the upheaval possible. He argues that '…to the apologists for Haile Selassie, including most western scholars, the important consideration was the façade of social and economic transformation that had taken place since the 1941 liberation' (p.160). He specifically cites the 'the developed sector of the economy' (Ibid.) and dismisses it as insignificant rather than arguing out his case. Yet, as I tried to show above, there was a steady expansion of the modern sector of the economy over the three decades between liberation and revolution. In fact, I would like to argue, following Tocqueville, that "Revolutions are not always brought about by a gradual decline from bad to worse. …The regime, which is destroyed by a revolution, is almost always an improvement on its immediate predecessor" (quoted on p. 12).

Paulos has opted to organize his book around the notion of 'feudalism'. It is replete with terms like feudal autocracy, feudal government, feudal rulers, feudal lords, feudal regime, and feudal monarchy from beginning to end (see the index). The underlying paradigm of the study is Marxist. And this paradigm has blinded him to the social and economic dynamics of the country. The very facts that he marshals in his work can be used, however, to bring out the significance of the other factors.

An interesting national trend to which I drew attention at the very beginning of this review article is the question of population explosion in the country as a whole and in the urban centres in particular. The consequences of this can be seen in the role that the poor and the jobless played in the revolutionary months. When university students and teachers went out on demonstrations, they, in the words of Paulos, '…soon attracted a large number of street vendors and the urban poor and jobless. Buses, private cars - anything moving on the streets - were stoned' (p.179). The police were unable to control the mass unrest; and to make matters worse, the disturbances quickly spread to major towns around the country.[17] In some of the provincial towns, virtual revolutionary upheavals occurred even if the author cites only two of them. I would like to mention here the case of Jimma where the people rose up against the notorious provincial governor, Tsehayu Enqwo Selassie, who had to flee to save his life. In fact, the Ethiopian revolution was a preeminently urban affair; the peasantry was calm. Paulos had to strain the sources to report peasant revolts in a district not far from Addis. At the end of the day, the revolution would not have succeeded if the government had effectively controlled the instruments of repression.

One of the seven commonalities of revolutions round the world that Brinton lists is the 'inept use of force to contain the growing rebellion' (p. 14). Ethiopia was no exception. There was a clear lack of direction from the centre and in fact the emperor obstructed (as I pointed out above) government efforts to take firm measures to cope with some of the numerous problems that arose. He was too old to use the enormous powers he had amassed. His infirmity explains why he acceded to the recurrent demands of the armed forces. In fact, there were persistent rumours (Paulos cites one of them on p. 228) that he turned down proposals to crush the *Derg* with a sudden and lightening attack in its early days. The decay of the ruling elite reinforced the disarray, confusion and helplessness of formerly influential and powerful courtiers. The author talks of 'a virtual power vacuum' in late spring (p.217). This is a correct assessment. Unless this factor is taken into account, no explanation would suffice to account for the revolution.

The last substantive point that I would like to raise is the question of ideology. The 1960s saw communism at its apex worldwide. European and American universities were shaken by student revolts, which were principally inspired by leftist ideology. It was at the beginning of this decade that the Ethiopian Student Movement was born, primarily because a group of radicals (nicknamed Crocodiles) espoused Marxist-Leninist ideology. Communism had some 'virtues' that enabled it to quickly dominate the political space in the university – it had 'answers' to all the leading political questions of the country; it was highly promissory; it had a millenarian tinge that appealed to students with an Orthodox Christian background. It offered a perfectly new way of looking at the society that gave students the cocky feeling that they had intellectual superiority over their non-Marxist professors. It had many of the key slogans and rhetoric needed to mobilise the masses. And it was riding high on the international arena, further adding to the self-confidence of the young Marxists. Thus, by espousing Marxism-Leninism, the Ethiopian Student Movement gave the revolution a complete ideology, a formula, a 'road map' and a sense of purpose. In sharp contrast to the vigour, vitality and sense of superiority that the radicals acquired from the new ideology, the conservatives were inactive or did not systematically think the problems through. The most educated within the power elite – Aklilu Habte Wold, Endalkachew Mekonnen, Mika'el Emeru, to cite only the leading ones – were the least 'intellectual' of them all. The less educated – Haddis Alemayehu, Asrate Kassa, Girmachew Teclehawariat, to cite again the most prominent – struggled to understand the complicated problems of the country and attempted to propose solutions. But they were little equipped – by formal education - for the task. In short, it is not possible to conceive of a revolution without an ideology; it is a pity that Paulos did not give it due credit in his narrative and in his analysis.

In spite of this, however, he has written a book that can generate extensive discussion and debate. This is commendable. Yet, there are some factual and technical glitches. The late Harold Marcus, professor of history at Michigan State University (East Lansing) was never an 'official' of the US government and, as far as I know, never 'worked for the Rand Corporation' (p.108). Major Teferra Tekleab, of Eritrean origin one of the founders of the *Derg*, was not, to the best of my knowledge, the 'best man of Mengistu and a godfather to the son of Atnafu Abate' (p.216). While it is true that the redoubtable Mesfin Wolde Mariam was 'appointed' to the governorship of Gimbi *awraja* (in the former province of Wellega), he never accepted the post; he remained in Addis (p.167). The statement that '…the proportion of Moslems and Christians in Ethiopia stands at 40% to 60% respectively' reflects the general view(p.3). Nevertheless, the last but one census (1994) puts all Christians at slightly over 60% (of which Orthodox Christians were 50%) while Moslems constituted 32%. The author also states that 'The aristocracy, enfeebled by Haile Selassie's centralisation efforts, was later almost wholly liquidated during the Fascist occupation' (p.27). Fascists indeed killed quite a few prominent aristocrats, but the greater proportion of the social group survived.

The problem connected with the Habte Wold 'family' is methodological rather than factual. To begin with, the term 'family' is debatable, to say the least. Even more serious is the point that the author makes that 'the strongest pressure on Haile Selassie to step down in favor of his son came from the Habte Wold family, which included Prime Minister Aklilu Habte Wold, and an ambitious aristocratic group led by Leul Ras Asrate Kassa, chairman of the Crown Council' (p.188). This kind of bold statement has to be documented together (ideally) with a critical evaluation of the evidence. Otherwise, it would not have any value.

It is a pity that the author did not take care to furnish his book with an accurate bibliography. The entries are not well-organised and some of the useful works he cites in the text (ex. Ahadu Saboure's and Zenebe Feleke's memoirs) are not included in the list. A more serious complaint concerns the works he has not consulted for this book: to cite some examples, Andargachew Tiruneh's book on the revolution, Bahru Zewde's book on the intellectual pioneers, Tesfaye Mekonnen's memoirs and Andargachew Aseged's history of Meison. The index does not include all the names discussed in the text or in the notes. Finally, this reviewer finds it difficult to understand the rationale for the long Postscript (pp. 247-282). It does justice neither to the history of the revolution after 1974 nor to the history of the regime that toppled the *Derg* in 1991.

In spite of these shortcomings, *Haile Selassie, Western Education and Political Revolution* is a highly thought-provoking and useful book.

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## Notes

1. C. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
2. Addis Hiwot was among the first Marxist intellectuals to propose a Marxist explanation to the Ethiopian revolution in his much read, *Ethiopia: From Autocracy to Revolution* (London: Review of African Political Economy, 1975).
3. The World Bank, *World Development Report, 1978* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, August, 1978), p. 47.
4. Shiferaw Jamo, "An Overview of the Economy, 1941-74," in Shiferaw Bekele (ed.), *An Economic History Ethiopia* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1995), p. 21.
5. *Ibid.* 6 Imperial Ethiopian Government, *The Third Five Year Development Plan (1968-1973)* (Addis Ababa: Imperial Ethiopian Government, 1968), p.
7. Tekeste Negash, *Rethinking Education in Ethiopia* (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1996).
8. Asmerom Kidane, "Estimating the Ethiopian Population by Age and Geographical Distribtion 1935-1985", *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. I (Moscow: Nuka Publishers, 1988), p. 63. This is a reliable estimate as it is based on the estimates of the Central Statistical Office.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
10. Alula Abate, "Demography, Migration and Urbanization in Modern Ethiopia," in Shiferw Bekele (ed.), *An Economic History Ethiopia* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1995), p.307.
11. However, in the 1920s and early 30s, the major pressure or (to use a current buzz word) 'conditionality' set by the powerful European colonial countries was characterized by the demand for the effective and quick abolition of slave trade and slavery. But, in spite of the wishes of the rulers, the state was unable to 'deliver' promptly because the regional lords exercised considerable autonomy and were thus able to resist the pressure from the Centre.
12. Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn raises this issue as the first item in the list of ten reforms he suggests in his article, 'Até Menelikena Ityopya,' It is also interesting to see Haile Selassie's presentation of the issue in his memoirs: see E. Ullendorff (trans. and ann.), *The Autobiography of Emperor Haile Selassie I: 'My Life and Ethiopia's Progress' 1892-1937* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 75. It should be noted that Haile Selassie considered himself to be an opponent of feudalism.
13. I use the expression 'modern state' for the imperial state even if the process of westernization was not completed. Seen against the structure of the traditional polity, which he inherited, it can be said that Haile Selassie left behind a relatively westernized state.
14. Ahadu Sabure, *Yäqädamawi Haylä Selassie Fesaména Yä-Därg Anäsas* (Addis Ababa: n.p.), pp.215-217.
15. C. Clapham, *Haile Selassie's Government* (London: Longmans, 1969). See also his *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Patrick Gilkes, *The Dying Lion: Feudalism and Modernization in Ethiopia* (London: Julien Friedman, 1975); J. Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).
16. See Robert L. Hess, *Ethiopia: The Modernization of Autocracy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970); Gilkes, *The Dying Lion.*
17. Some of the leading members of the *Derg* were born and raised in towns – Teferra Tekleab (already Marxist-oriented before the Revolution), Mengistu, Fekre Selassie, Moges, Legesse, and a few others. Other key soldiers from outside of the *Derg* but who occupied key offices in the security apparatus of the military regime had an urban background – Daniel Asfaw, Tesfaye Wolde Selassie, to name only two. Could this background have a correlation with their readiness to spouse the revolutionary ideology? It merits investigation.