Between 1974 and 1991, Ethiopia passed through two revolutions in which the students played an uncommon role. That history has been extensively analysed by scholars, including former members of the imperial Ethiopian student movement. The two books under review are the latest additions to the growing literature on this subject. Without which Ethiopian history of the last half century cannot be fully appreciated. The books are qualitatively different. One is merely descriptive and uninspiring, the other is interpretive and provocative, bound to cause considerable controversy especially among Ethiopians.

Balvisk’s *The Quest for Expression*, which seeks to examine ‘the democratization process in Ethiopia’ under three regimes, is a continuation of her pioneering and first substantive scholarly work on the Ethiopian student movement.

It is, however, less weighty. Slightly less than one-fifth of the book is a rehash of the first, and about quarter of it deals with issues, such as the Red Terror, which are well covered in other works. Only about a third of the volume offers new material but hardly worth the effort.

Balvisk’s main conclusion is that the successive governments of Emperor Haile Selassie I, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam and ex-guerilla Meles Zenawi, were characterized by repression but that the Emperor may have been more tolerant than his successors. The two reasons why all three were so repressive was that they wanted to entrench themselves in power and because they ‘feared disintegration and chaos’ (182-3). Under Mengistu’s dictatorship, ‘democracy was strengthened’ (91-92), but without the slightest tolerance for freedom of expression or organization. The situation has scarcely improved under the current and more democratic government, which has not allowed university students to form any autonomous union across ethnic particularities or to have their own publication, both of which were granted by the absolutist monarchical regime.

How it is that an autocratic monarch was far more tolerant of intellectual protest than the revolutionaries who replaced him? They were thought by many to have frittered away their brutal dictatorship, which they buttressed with the narrow Leninist consensus of revolutionary orthodoxy, in the ‘historical process’ that propelled them to power. It may be also that the soldiers saw dissent as an unnecessary luxury in the midst of incessant conflicts – an intolerable distraction from the primary national mission of waging war to safeguard the country’s territorial integrity.

But, how is it that the current leaders, who were active participants in the student protests of the 1960s and 1970s, and who have established a federal system with a relatively boisterous press, are less politically authorized and have fewer beliefs and achievements by assembly within the premise of the academic world than the autocracy they helped destitute? It is not enough to say that it was because they are power-hungry. It is regrettable that the author did not provide an extended analysis why three successive but quite different regimes pursued, more or less, the same repressive policy. The reason for ‘quest for expression’. At the very least, a brief assessment of the pivotal role of students in contemporary Ethiopian politics. The latter half of the book contemplates that its bitterness and extremity into positive energy to challenge a delaying but obdurate autocratic regime that futilely tried to suppress them. They catalysed a revolution that brought about its dooms. That they set off forces that moved in a quite different direction, or that all the revolutionary outcomes did not conform to their wishes or expectations, was not their fault. It was history’s ‘cunning’. But Messay would have none of that. He saw it as a ‘triumph of reason’ (191) that mindlessly mimicked the West only to suffer a debilitating crisis of national identity. Of particular harm was the peripheralisation or exclusion of the traditional Christian educational system, which was ‘a source of unity and communal identity’ (60) or ‘an agent of unity and national cohesion’ (191).

The Euro-centred secular education that Emperor Haile Selassie I instituted took ‘away from Ethiopians their innocence and confidence, rendering their perception of the elect of God’, (71) observes Messay rather incredulously. He adds: ‘The great tragedy of modern Ethiopia is, therefore, its failure to produce domestic, homegrown intellectuals who would have conceived modernization as an upgrading of traditional culture’ (100-193).

A thoughtful integration through a reinterpretation of the traditional and the modern, as Japan and India had done so successfully, was the singular failure of the Ethiopian educational system. This, in turn, the author opines, was the lack or absence of a national ideology, which is vaguely defined; but one is led to assume that Messay is lamenting the abandonment of the ideology of the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia, precursor of the modern Ethiopian state. ‘One of the challenges’, he writes, ‘is how the two religious communities (Orthodox Christian and Muslim) and the various ethnic groups can evolve national characteristics through the inheritance of the cultural and historical legacies of traditional Ethiopia, also known as Abyssinia’ (6). One wonders if the author is being nostalgic about the old imperial Ethiopia.

Even though Ethiopia was virtually the only sovereign state in colonized Africa, posits Messay, its modern educational system was characteristic culturally.

The main goal of colonial education was to spread, promote and universalise Western values, beliefs and achievements by a concomitantly demeaning, distorting and marginalizing ‘native’ traditions, thought systems, cultures and histories. It presented the exogenous as exotic, superior and normative while deprecating the indigenous as inferior, primitive and barbaric, it was to be ashamed of, despised and rejected in toto. Colonial education cultivated imitation and dependency instead of innovation and self-reliance; it nurtured self-hatred and self-negation on the part of the colonized. The cumulative and inequitable legacy is ‘severe cultural dislocation’ (4). In essence, the educated but uprooted native elites had, willy-nilly committed cultural suicide. These failures in ‘transmitting the features that define Ethiopia and safeguard its cohesion’ (60).

Messay’s second and equally controversial proposition is that ‘contempt for one’s tradition’, which breeds ‘extreme beliefs’, was the fundamental reason why Ethiopia’s youth so zealously and uncturiously embraced Marxism-Leninism.

He does not deny that social grievances lead to popular discontent, but argues that sociological problems are insufficient to explain radicalism and revolutionism. Since structural and institutional erosion could have been integrated or harmonised with the secular without antagonizing the non-Christian communities and eventually lead to half the population. He is for pluralism but seems to suggest the impossible restoration of the Christian communities to their former glory, the Amhara and Tigray who alternately dominated the state for centuries. By his own account, the dominant ideology and legacies were disparaging and alienating of Muslims and other ethnic groups. Yet he is dismissive of the current political arrangement, which, whatever its blemishes, has significantly corrected past injustices and inequalities.

Messay’s second and equally controversial proposition is that ‘contempt for one’s tradition’, which breeds ‘extreme beliefs’, was the fundamental reason why Ethiopia’s youth so zealously and uncturiously embraced Marxism-Leninism. He does not deny that social grievances lead to popular discontent, but argues that sociological problems are insufficient to explain radicalism and revolutionism. Since structural and institutional erosion could have been integrated or harmonised with the secular without antagonizing the non-Christian communities and eventually lead to half the population. He is for pluralism but seems to suggest the impossible restoration of the Christian communities to their former glory, the Amhara and Tigray who alternately dominated the state for centuries. By his own account, the dominant ideology and legacies were disparaging and alienating of Muslims and other ethnic groups. Yet he is dismissive of the current political arrangement, which, whatever its blemishes, has significantly corrected past injustices and inequalities.

Messay’s second and equally controversial proposition is that ‘contempt for one’s tradition’, which breeds ‘extreme beliefs’, was the fundamental reason why Ethiopia’s youth so zealously and uncturiously embraced Marxism-Leninism. He does not deny that social grievances lead to popular discontent, but argues that sociological problems are insufficient to explain radicalism and revolutionism. Since structural and institutional erosion could have been integrated or harmonised with the secular without antagonizing the non-Christian communities and eventually lead to half the population. He is for pluralism but seems to suggest the impossible restoration of the Christian communities to their former glory, the Amhara and Tigray who alternately dominated the state for centuries. By his own account, the dominant ideology and legacies were disparaging and alienating of Muslims and other ethnic groups. Yet he is dismissive of the current political arrangement, which, whatever its blemishes, has significantly corrected past injustices and inequalities.

Messay’s second and equally controversial proposition is that ‘contempt for one’s tradition’, which breeds ‘extreme beliefs’, was the fundamental reason why Ethiopia’s youth so zealously and uncturiously embraced Marxism-Leninism. He does not deny that social grievances lead to popular discontent, but argues that sociological problems are insufficient to explain radicalism and revolutionism. Since structural and institutional erosion could have been integrated or harmonised with the secular without antagonizing the non-Christian communities and eventually lead to half the population. He is for pluralism but seems to suggest the impossible restoration of the Christian communities to their former glory, the Amhara and Tigray who alternately dominated the state for centuries. By his own account, the dominant ideology and legacies were disparaging and alienating of Muslims and other ethnic groups. Yet he is dismissive of the current political arrangement, which, whatever its blemishes, has significantly corrected past injustices and inequalities.

Messay’s second and equally controversial proposition is that ‘contempt for one’s tradition’, which breeds ‘extreme beliefs’, was the fundamental reason why Ethiopia’s youth so zealously and uncturiously embraced Marxism-Leninism. He does not deny that social grievances lead to popular discontent, but argues that sociological problems are insufficient to explain radicalism and revolutionism. Since structural and institutional erosion could have been integrated or harmonised with the secular without antagonizing the non-Christian communities and eventually lead to half the population. He is for pluralism but seems to suggest the impossible restoration of the Christian communities to their former glory, the Amhara and Tigray who alternately dominated the state for centuries. By his own account, the dominant ideology and legacies were disparaging and alienating of Muslims and other ethnic groups. Yet he is dismissive of the current political arrangement, which, whatever its blemishes, has significantly corrected past injustices and inequalities.

Messay’s second and equally controversial proposition is that ‘contempt for one’s tradition’, which breeds ‘extreme beliefs’, was the fundamental reason why Ethiopia’s youth so zealously and uncturiously embraced Marxism-Leninism. He does not deny that social grievances lead to popular discontent, but argues that sociological problems are insufficient to explain radicalism and revolutionism. Since structural and institutional erosion could have been integrated or harmonised with the secular without antagonizing the non-Christian communities and eventually lead to half the population. He is for pluralism but seems to suggest the impossible restoration of the Christian communities to their former glory, the Amhara and Tigray who alternately dominated the state for centuries. By his own account, the dominant ideology and legacies were disparaging and alienating of Muslims and other ethnic groups. Yet he is dismissive of the current political arrangement, which, whatever its blemishes, has significantly corrected past injustices and inequalities.

Messay’s second and equally controversial proposition is that ‘contempt for one’s tradition’, which breeds ‘extreme beliefs’, was the fundamental reason why Ethiopia’s youth so zealously and uncturiously embraced Marxism-Leninism. He does not deny that social grievances lead to popular discontent, but argues that sociological problems are insufficient to explain radicalism and revolutionism. Since structural and institutional erosion could have been integrated or harmonised with the secular without antagonizing the non-Christian communities and eventually lead to half the population. He is for pluralism but seems to suggest the impossible restoration of the Christian communities to their former glory, the Amhara and Tigray who alternately dominated the state for centuries. By his own account, the dominant ideology and legacies were disparaging and alienating of Muslims and other ethnic groups. Yet he is dismissive of the current political arrangement, which, whatever its blemishes, has significantly corrected past injustices and inequalities.

Messay’s second and equally controversial proposition is that ‘contempt for one’s tradition’, which breeds ‘extreme beliefs’, was the fundamental reason why Ethiopia’s youth so zealously and uncturiously embraced Marxism-Leninism. He does not deny that social grievances lead to popular discontent, but argues that sociological problems are insufficient to explain radicalism and revolutionism. Since structural and institutional erosion could have been integrated or harmonised with the secular without antagonizing the non-Christian communities and eventually lead to half the population. He is for pluralism but seems to suggest the impossible restoration of the Christian communities to their former glory, the Amhara and Tigray who alternately dominated the state for centuries. By his own account, the dominant ideology and legacies were disparaging and alienating of Muslims and other ethnic groups. Yet he is dismissive of the current political arrangement, which, whatever its blemishes, has significantly corrected past injustices and inequalities.
athiasm. ‘In vain’, Messay submits, ‘does one try to reduce the inflation with Marxism-Leninism to the impact of grave social problems rather than to the disaffection with Orthodox Christianity’ (127). The paradox is that it was the rejected religion that provided the added inspiration for socialism because of its affinity with Marxism – i.e. Christian millenarianism is compatible with Marxist utopianism. As in Ethiopia, in China, too, students and intellectuals gravitated toward Marxism because their religion shared much with radical utopianism. Confrucianism encouraged insurrection to restore a mythical world of justice and harmony.

At least in one instance, Messay’s assumptions seem to have been debunked. Hindusism, after all, is not avowed to radicalism. Ergo, the Nepalese monarchy has been discarded on the insistence of an insurgent movement with a socialist vision. Today, Nepal is a republic, its government headed by a Marxist premier. And there may be more than religious fidelity as to why Marxism or revolution has been unappealing to Indian intellectuals. Many scholars, including most notably Barrington Moore, Jr., have studied the multiple causes of the legendary passivity of the Indian as opposed to the insurgent Chinese. In addition to tested techniques of social control, the post-independence democratic system of dispersed authority, which contrasted with the centralised autocracy of Ethiopia, must be appreciated.

As Frantz Fanon eloquently described it, ‘radicalism was a product of social contradictions,’ observes Messay, ‘and not just of scarcity of food but of freedom and justice too. We need a humanist vision that will rescue us from the numerous problems that imperil the planet: among them, dehumanizing poverty amidst plenty, the degradation and mindless plunder of natural resources, global warming and the threat of nuclear extinction, and the denial of freedom and violation of human rights in much of the world. To ponder these imponderables is not to miss the continuing relevance of Marx’s utopia.

Messay Kebede views the Ethiopian revolutionaries as forces of darkness that brought only ruin and suffering, but the same forces also dismantled feudalism and hereditary rule, empowering hitherto marginalized, exploited and supressed peoples. The author has delivered a thoughtful, engrossing, and necessary book, even though he is obviously prone to assert in favour of demonstrating a proposition, and the documentation is less than impressive. The untenable assumptions, the inconsistency, repetition and eclecticism should not distract from its deeper insights. In its expositional clarity, its comprehensive comparative scope, and its inextensive analysis, this is a book that provokes reflection. Students of comparative social movements will find it useful and Ethiopians, particularly the generation whose history it tells, cannot afford to ignore it. Debates of how to create a new Ethiopia, where the frontiers of freedom are expanded and ordinary people can control their own destiny, must continue.

Notes