The Genesis of Student Radicalism in Ethiopia

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The Quest for Expression:
State and the University in Ethiopia under Three Regimes, 1952 – 2005
by Randi Rnning Balsvik
Addis Ababa University Press, 2007, 190 pp.
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Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960-1974
by Messay Kebede
University of Rochester Press, 2008, 235 pp.
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Between 1974 and 1991, Ethiopia passed through two revolutions in which students played an uncommon role. That history has been extensively analysed by scholars, including former members of the international 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: while one is merely descriptive and uninspiring, the other is interpretive and provocative, bound to cause considerable controversy especially among Ethiopians.

Balsvik'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.[1] It is, however, less weighty. Slightly less than one-fifth of the book is a rehash of the first, and more than half 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 any fresh insights.

Balsvik's main conclusion is that the successive governments of Emperor Haile Selassie I, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam and ex-guerrilla Meles Zenawi were characterized by repression of dissent 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, 'disciplinary learning 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 an autonomous union across ethnic particularities or to have their own publication, both of which were granted by the absolutist monarchical regime.

How is it that an autocratic monarch was far more tolerant of intellectual protest than the revolutionaries who replaced him? The military men sought justification for their brutal dictatorship, which they buttressed with the narrow Leninist conception of revolutionary authority, 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 permissive of free expression and assemblage within the premise of the academic world than the autocracy they helped destroy? 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 toward students' 'quest for expression'. At the very least, a brief exposition of the social regimes should have been provided.

Messay Kebede's *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia* stands in sharp contrast to Balsvik's historical assessment of the pivotal role of students in contemporary Ethiopian politics. The latter saw them as a revolutionary vanguard in a just struggle for social change - an enraged but highly conscious generation that channelled its bitterness and estrangement into positive energy to challenge a decaying but obdurate autocratic regime that futilely tried to suppress them. They catalysed a revolution that brought about its doom. 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. In his psycho-historical analysis of the social movement, he treats the students as a mis-educated and misguided lot who became 'infatuated' with a foreign ideology they barely understood to transform a society they did not know or from which they were completely divorced. His verdict: the radical students, turned revolutionaries, were nihilistic adventurers who brought catastrophe upon both themselves and the society they intended to change, root and branch. This didactically scathing critique challenges all previous scholarship that presented the students as progressives who nonetheless made serious strategic mistakes for lack of experience and doctrinal rigidity. It is a powerful indictment of a generation that made incomparable sacrifices for a lofty cause.

Messay attributes the fatal attraction of Ethiopia's youth to Marxism-Leninism mainly to Euro-centrism, political repression, and a conducive international climate. Most critical to his analysis is cultural alienation, and ideology is given primacy over the structural as the cause of revolution.

Even though Ethiopia was virtually the only sovereign state in colonized Africa, posits Messay, its modern educational system was characteristically colonial. The main goal of colonial education was to spread, promote and universalise Western values, beliefs and achievements by 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, something 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 inevitable result was 'severe cultural dislocation' (4). In essence, the educated but uprooted native elites had, willy-nilly, committed cultural suicide. These were the 'pernicious' effects of Eurocentrism as opposed to Afrocentrism, which tends to glorify African cultures and histories.

The author avers, with little empirical evidence, that Eurocentrism had the same impact on Ethiopian intellectuals. It produced a 'rootless intelligentsia' (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 common identity' (60) or 'an agent of unity and national cohesion' (191). The Euro-centered secular education that Emperor Haile Selassie I instituted 'took away from Ethiopians their innocence and confidence, including their perception of the elect of God', (71) observes Messay rather incredulously. He adds that: 'The great tragedy of modern Ethiopia is, therefore, its failure to produce domestic, home-grown 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 political order.

Granted, the colonial system was overarching and generally harmful to the colonized mind. What is not so clear is whether it had the kind of totalising effect on the 'native' educated elites as Messay depicts. After all, local (African) traditions and cultures had their own mechanisms of resistance and the 'native' mind was not a tabula rasa, a sponge that passively absorbed whatever it was presumably taught. The colonial system was essentially the same in its mode of operations, but who would deny the differences, even if only minimal, between, for example, Belgian and French or British and Italian education? Likewise for Ethiopia, Messay seems to exaggerate his claim that modern education failed in 'transmitting the features that define Ethiopia and safeguard its cohesion' (60). He goes further: 'Because what was taught was so disparaging of Ethiopian culture and history, it unleashed the desire to get rid of everything and start anew' (70).

My own experience is quite different from this. One thing is incontestable, though: what was taught as national history was rather rudimentary and with a heavy bias toward the two politically dominant ethnic groups; the southern peoples were either omitted or misrepresented. Neglect or inadequate presentation cannot be equated with disparagement or rejection, however. Taking myself as an example, I cannot recall a moment when I was taught to despise my own heritage either at the primary or university level. And my motivation in joining the student movement was not to erase or 'liquidate' (Messay's word) the country's legacies but to change the wretched conditions of life. Messay is making sweeping generalizations that are not supported with sufficient evidence. Moreover, it is not at all clear how the traditional (religious) education could have been integrated or harmonised with the secular without antagonizing the non-Christian communities, possibly close to half the population. He is for pluralism but seems to suggest the impossible restoration of the Christian ideology of 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 inequalities and injustices.

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 uncritically embraced Marxism-Leninism. He does not deny that social grievances lead to popular discontent, but argues that socio-economic problems are insufficient to explain radicalism and revolutionism. Since structuralist explanations 'obscure rather than clarify' (164), he prefers a cultural explanation: 'no matter how grave social problems are, radicalism is unthinkable without cultural dissension' (11) or 'revolution takes root under conditions of cultural dislocation' (166). This may be debatable, but he is correct in asserting that severe social conditions alone do not lead to rebellion or insurrection. If it were so, societies with similar conditions would have experienced revolutionary upheavals, but they have not. The explanation for why some societies are more prone to rebellion than others lies in 'cultural traits', or in that 'some cultures must be more susceptible to radical ideologies than others' (105). He thinks that Christianity is more amenable to radical visions than are Islam and Hinduism. 'Hinduism does not incite millenarian or utopian thinking' (36).

This is why, Messay claims, Ethiopian students became irresistibly attracted to Marxism whereas Indian and Nepalese students were not, although social conditions in all the three countries were generally similar. The latter two stayed essentially liberal and reformist in their political outlook because they remained grounded in their cultures. In both India and Nepal, religion was a bulwark against radicalisation. Nepalese students would not dare question the sacral legitimacy of the monarchy. In contrast, Ethiopian students became disenchanted with their religion and looked for substitutes; they found it in

atheism. 'In vain', Messay submits, 'does one try to reduce the infatuation 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. Confucianism encouraged insurrection to restore a mythical world of justice and harmony.

At least in one instance, Messay's assumptions seem to have been debunked. Hinduism, after all, is not averse 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 Maoist 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 insurrectionist 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 have been a stabilising factor. There is a consensus that Chinese Marxists benefited from the materialist orientation of Confucianism. The supposition that, without the harmonious mix of messianic Christianity and utopian Marxism, radical Ethiopian students could not possibly have galvanised the university population for revolution is, however, highly speculative and less convincing. It demands further investigation.

Messay's third premise is nonetheless basically correct and is not new: the convergence of social pressures, political repression, and a 'globalist' hegemonic ideology account for the triumph of Marxism over liberalism and of revolutionism over reformism. But he is ambivalent about whether the Emperor was too slow or the students were too rash for change. He blames the former for lack of imagination and timidity in carrying out necessary economic and social reforms but at the same time harshly criticises the students for being impatient. 'Ethiopian students rejected liberal solutions, not because it was inappropriate, but because it contradicted their prior ideological commitment to radicalism' (2). This seems to put the cart before the horse. Liberalization under autocracy was a chimera. He is at pains to prove that radicalism was at fault and that the imperial government was for reformism albeit too hesitant and lethargic. At times, the author's reasoning is rather incomprehensible. Consider these two statements: 'The nomination of Endalkatchew confirms that Haile Selassie had finally understood the necessity of reforms' (8). This when the Emperor's reign was in the twilight zone! It is not even certain that the 'king of kings' was fully aware of what was happening around him. And then this: 'Even the Eritrean question had a perfectly liberal solution: the return of federalism and the concrete democratization of the Ethiopian state would have appeased the majority of Eritreans' (18). But a concrete democratization of the state would have called for a revolution, precisely what the students advocated and enacted. As for the Eritrean question, it was the Emperor's adamant refusal to return to the status quo ante that drove the Eritrean youth and peasants to the mountains, from where they first decapitated and then destroyed two repressive regimes successively.

What then finally enabled the radical students was repression combined with their rigid consistency. 'Ethiopian student radicalism was a product of social contradictions,' observes Messay, 'but even more so of the impact of radical groups who progressively politicized the majority of students' (21). But how did they convert the reluctant majority? Through 'hard work and dedication' (26), which entailed indoctrination, intimidation and even coercion. Also, the success 'of the minority derived from its ability to express the hidden, unconscious desire of the majority of students' (22). The moderate or liberal students too agitated for reform, but the regime's response was more repression, depriving them of an alternative to the radical agenda. Reluctantly, they joined the revolutionaries who seemed to be riding with the mood of the times. Liberalism was on the defensive and Marxism-Leninism was in high vogue. Ideology alone, of course, does not explain the ascendancy of the radicals, for ideas have a material base: the revolutionaries arose out of concrete social circumstances which they struggled to change and by which they were changed.

It is indubitable that, in the struggle to change themselves and the larger society, Ethiopian students committed fatal mistakes. Their mistakes were those of the Russian revolutionaries whom they imitated uncritically and lavishly. Emboldened by the optimism of the times, when freedom and justice seemed within humanity's grasp, they insisted on removing the old order and replacing it with a totally new one. Like the Bolsheviks, they believed they could build a higher and better social order in a backward land burdened with ignorance, poverty and the weight of history, a land utterly lacking in a democratic tradition and whose socio-economic conditions were not ripe for such a gigantic social transformation. This was to be accomplished under the leadership of a vanguard party, 'which alone thinks, guides, and decides for all,' according to Rosa Luxemburg. This Leninist but un-Marxist social engineering of conspirators, of course, failed disastrously, as Luxemburg may have anticipated.

Yet, Marx and his ideas remain relevant. As Frantz Fanon eloquently described it, the world is still 'a geography of hunger' – 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, in its comprehensive comparative scope, and in its extensive analysis, this is a book that provokes reflection. Students of comparative social movements will find it useful and Ethiopians, particularly 'the generation' whose story 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

[1] Randi Rnning Balsvik, *Haile Selassie's Students: The Intellectual and Social Back ground to Revolution, 1952-1974*, Addis Ababa, Addis Ababa University Press, co-published with Michigan State University Press, 2005.