

Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia 1960-1974 by Messay Kebede. University of Rochester Press: New York. 2008. ISBN 13: 978-58046-291-4, 223 pp

If one would be so bold as to make a suggestion to the author, then the last sentence of the book by Bahru Zewde (2002) would be a fitting introduction to the book by Messay. Bahru writes:

...what a long way things appear to have come from the time in the early twentieth century, when intellectuals relied on gentle persuasion rather than violent confrontation, when they sought royal patronage rather than the overthrow of the monarchy, when they advocated gradual reform rather than the revolutionary transformation of society. (Ibid: 211)

In so far as this book discusses the above mentioned generation of Ethiopian intellectuals and the process of their radicalisation it does give the impression of being a sequel to the earlier text by Bahru.

The reader familiar with the literature on Ethiopian political history, will realise that this particular work by Messay is only one example of a whole body of work by foreigners and Ethiopians, consisting of many books and maybe hundreds of articles in different languages, that focus on the Ethiopian student movement, the metamorphosis of the student Left into the EPRP (Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party and the AESM (All Ethiopian Socialist Movement), the Ethiopian revolution and its aftermath etc.

While the specific areas of focus of these authors vary, there are some underlying patterns that define the works of the participants of the Ethiopian student movement and the civilian Left parties. These works are often quasi autobiographical in nature relying on the participants' memories and written records (whatever available and capable of retrieval) of those days and events, which is not to say that some of these authors do not rely on other sources. These works usually project an apologetic and at the same time defensive tone as if these authors are 'atoning' for the supposed 'mistakes' of their past and in the same breath explaining the extenuating circumstances.

This particular work continues and amplifies themes that Messay has raised in his earlier works (Messay 1999, Messay 2005).

Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia 1960-1974 consisting of an introduction, nine chapters and a conclusion is a vigorous attempt to argue the thesis that the introduction of the modern educational system into Ethiopia as part of the drive to modernization created a mood of alienation and cultural dislocation

amongst its products (i.e. the educated). The author argues that this coupled with the political and socio-economic contradictions of the imperial state (archaic and centralized absolutism, the land question, national question etc), created the context for the radicalization of a generation of student activists and the 1974 revolution. Messay repeatedly makes the point in his book that all of the 'ills' in the form of Marxism-Leninism and the 'politicization of ethnicity' that have affected the Ethiopian state and social formation have their roots in the above mentioned conjuncture.

The introduction sketches out the framework of his argument and also makes reference to some of the concepts that are central to his discussion. A problem that the discerning reader would perceive here is that while the author defines culture, he leaves many of other key terms that recur in the text, such as modernity, modernization, alienation etc. undefined.

The first chapter discusses in a cursory manner the perspective that assigns causative impact to structural factors in explaining the Ethiopian revolution, pinpoints its supposed weaknesses and underlines the importance of taking into account, culture as a variable. The author also outlines different variants of what he terms the structuralist perspective in explaining the radicalisation of the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM). He also introduces here some of the main lines of his argument that would constitute the basis of his later discussion such as the supposed 'Ethiopian cultural disposition to revolutionary ideology'.

The second and third chapters of the book address the modern educational system and its impact. While the second chapter outlines some general arguments about the implications of what Messay terms, a '*Eurocentric*' educational system and its consequences for non-European societies, the third chapter is more specific in that it outlines the supposed failings in terms of design and goals of the modern educational system and impact in the Ethiopian context. To summarize, the author, believes that '*alienation*', '*cultural pathology*' and '*mental disorientation*' were the ultimate long term consequences as far as the educated were concerned.

The remaining chapters of the book probe deeper into the nature of 'alienation' and the modalities of the adoption of the Marxist-Leninist world view on the part of the ESM. In these chapters, Messay assumes that the rejection of religion and tradition on the part of the educated created a psychological void that had to be filled. The process of modern education did not only create a 'void' but also created deep feelings of guilt and shame that had to be atoned for. Marxism-Leninism admirably fitted the bill in this regard. It allowed, a 'deracinated' elite to don the mantle of anti-western nationalism, created the hope of rapid modernization and the responsibility to take up the stalled task of modernization and carry it to success and ultimately not only legitimised but even necessitated the political ambitions of the educated due to the Leninist notion of the vanguard.

The sixth chapter of the book is of particular interest in that the author makes the sweeping claim that certain cultures and religions create a disposition for the adoption of Marxism in an atmosphere defined by alienation and cultural deculturation. The author believes that an indigenous or Ethiopian (read 'Abyssinian') messianism existed centred on the survival and ultimate victory of the besieged Abyssinian state and Orthodox Church over its enemies. The point being that this a priori messianism created a fertile ground for the notion of messianism implicit in Marxism-Leninism. Messay also expands his argument by making a fascinating point regarding the supposed parallels between the 'Ethiopian' view of the social world and Marxian dialectics. The following chapter contains an interesting but at the same time thinly substantiated discussion on how Marxist atheism and 'utopian' inclinations were a wry but at the same time effective substitute for religious beliefs and also allowed the leftists of the ESM to impute a moralizing tone and vocation to their position and actions.

The eight chapter sees the author delving into the realm of psychology and subconscious urges. One component of the discussion here views the radicalization of the ESM as also the expression of an oedipal rebellion on the part of the youth against the traditional deference due to elders and gerontocracy based patterns of leadership in Ethiopian society.

The last chapter presents an overview of the linkage between the radicalization of the ESM and structural variables. While the author does not discount the impact of structural factors, he reiterates, that "*Without the context of cultural discontinuity...economic causes by themselves cannot initiate a revolutionary movement.*" (168).

The conclusion summarizes the discussions of the previous chapters and concludes that there was a direct link between the introduction of the modern educational system, its devaluation of traditional values and institutions, the elevation of a western epistemic system and the latter radicalization of the educated elite, its adoption of Marxism-Leninism and the politics of ethnicity. The author believes that Ethiopian society is still living with the consequences of that particular conjuncture.

The problematics raised by Messay in this particular work is twofold in nature. On the one hand, there is the conundrum of the intellectual/intelligentsia as a revolutionary subject and on the other the issue of the modalities of the adoption of Marxism-Leninism on the part of the ESM. How and why did it happen?

It needs to be pointed out that in the Marxian schema, the intellectuals are not a revolutionary subject in the same way that the working class or the poor peasantry (in the aftermath of the Chinese Revolution and the contributions of Mao to Marxian theory) are understood to be. In the Marxian schema, the working class

and the poor peasantry are revolutionary subjects not merely because of their revolutionary consciousness but in a much more profound sense, because of the very conditions of their existence, which is not the case with the intelligentsia (Hobsbawm, 1973).

Messay in *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation 1960-1974*, is primarily interested in the second of the above two conundrums but the nature of his work inevitably also brings up the first question too.

Messay's, repeated references, to the tendency of the modern educational system to foster 'elitism' is apt and deserves further study. It is a phenomenon that is still true of the contemporary Ethiopian political arena. But then can't Messay and his approach also be faulted for the same tendency? After all, what else can be said of a work that postulates the intelligentsia as an agent/subject of revolution disregarding all other social actors? One valid criticism of the works on the ESM and the Ethiopian revolution of 1974 is that they completely ignore the possibility of a history from below (Subaltern studies approach) to the Ethiopian revolution, of which this work is a perfect example. This would necessitate a history/historiography of the Ethiopian revolution that accords primacy to the viewpoint, actions and positions of urban workers, the lumpen-proletariat and taxi drivers during that period.

The methodological premises of Messay's approach to the issue are awkward. He uses a cultural and psychological approach to study the issue of radicalisation. Unless one presumes that the author possessed special insight into the state of mind and psychological complexities of his colleagues and peers in the ESM, which needless to say is unlikely, a lot of his discussion and ruminations on alienation, Oedipal urges, guilt etc. on the part of radicalised intellectuals, becomes pure conjecture. The emphasis on culture and cultural dislocation as a causal variable for the radicalisation of the Ethiopian educated elite is also fraught with problems. After all the notion and phenomenon of culture is premised on continuity and cultures by definition are slow to evolve or change. This makes postulating the cultural variable to explain events such as revolutions problematic, to say the least.

Messay in his work also revives and utilizes several tired anti-Marxian tropes. For instance, his characterization of Lenin's notion of the vanguard is a caricature. He also ignores the historically complex relationship between the intelligentsia/intellectuals and Marxist movements and characterization and analysis of the political and class loyalties of intellectuals by Marxian thinkers.

Another anti-Marxian trope that Messay revives is the relationship between Marxism and religion. To be specific, religious references and symbolism in Marx's works often lead critics to argue that the Marxian project lies firmly within the messianic or Judeo-Christian worldview (Roberts, 2005). The logical next step

is the rejection of the scientific, atheistic and anti-utopian tenor of the Marxian project (Ibid). Messay makes the same mistake and goes on to argue that it is this very messianic and utopian component of Marxism that made Ethiopian students coming from the Orthodox tradition so receptive to Marxism. Interestingly, a similar point was also made by another author writing on the Russian intelligentsia of the late 19th and early 20th century (Halpin, 2000). The so called utopian and messianic component of Marxism-Leninism is taken as a given by Messay, when the reality is that it is an issue that deserves its very own sustained study and investigation.

His characterization of the psychological and personal motivations of the participants and leaders in the ESM might be construed by some as offensive. These individuals are accused of inherent feelings of guilt, dogmatic adherence to an alien creed, alienation, deracination, hunger for power etc. He views their behaviour as treasonous in light of the nature of the changes they desired to bring about. What is clear here is that Messay still has a long way to go before he reconciles himself with the transformations in Ethiopian society and politics, which he so vehemently abhors (the overthrow of the monarchy, assertions of identity along lines of nation and nationality, federalism, self determination, Eritrean independence etc.).

The ephemeral and fleeting nature of the Marxian episode in Ethiopia deserves its own attention. A whole generation of individuals and organizations have tended to be viewed as being influenced or having their roots in the Marxist framework. But one could justifiably ask whether this influence ever went beyond the adoption of tactics and phraseology characteristic of Marxist movements? If this is the case, then the question that arises is what do we mean by the impact of Marxism and Marxian influenced politics? At the risk of being personal, couldn't one take the author's own trajectory as exemplifying the superficial hold of the Marxian world view on the Ethiopian intelligentsia?

The reader can be forgiven for a feeling of déjà vu when reading this work. After all, Messay's work is in a way, only a contemporary example of what is after all a very old tendency which has the aim of pathologizing revolutionary thinking and politics. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, revolutionary movements and ideas (Marxism, Anarchism etc.) in Europe were often seen as the handiwork of the Jew/Jews, the quintessential rootless cosmopolitan/s, rebellious, unpatriotic and untrustworthy. In these works, the figure of the Jew was constructed as inherently subversive, anti-national and opposed to authority, and needless to mention this of course was a favourite theme of the movements of the right in Europe before the Second World War.

Later, in the 1950s and 60s, in the midst of the Cold War, certain North American social scientists strove to show that Marxist revolutionaries as a group were invariably alienated from their societies and deviant. In other words, the intellectual replaced the figure of the Jew. While the work of these social scientists is marginally better and to be preferred for departing from racist diatribes and also for attempting to give a scientific veneer to their methodology and conclusions, it is still old fashioned and flawed. Messay's work is in many ways an echo of this second tendency and its application to the Ethiopian context.

The selection bias of the author is also an issue and leads to unintended irony. In the book, the author makes repeated reference to students and student movements in Nepal and India to back his arguments about the importance of conserving indigenous values and the rejection of western ideas and epistemic systems. He points to the absence of radical movements in these societies as an outcome of the abovementioned rejection and absence of 'culturally heterodox elites' (for the author's views regarding Nepal, see pg33-35 and for India see, pgs 109, 139). This is deeply ironic in that the monarchy in Nepal has been overthrown in the aftermath of a protracted civil war and urban uprising led by the then CPN-M (Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist). As for India, in 2006, the then Indian prime minister termed the war led by the CPI-M (Communist Party of India-Maoist), the 'greatest internal security threat' to the Indian state (Chakravarti, 2008: 12). Either Messay is wrong about the stabilizing effects of conserving culture or events have been proceeding much faster than he has anticipated.

To conclude this review, the author is to be commended for writing an interesting and panoramic work that embraces a wide range of issues. Moreover, it is clear that Messay is passionately involved in and concerned about the problems he raises in his books and articles. His interest in and grasp of the literature in a variety of social science disciplines is also admirable. Messay's works are riveting in their ambition and scope.

After all, maybe books should also be read because of the very questions they encourage and raise in our minds and not necessarily for the insights or answers they might suggest.

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