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Review Articles

THE PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ETHIOPIA
Masking and Unmasking Tragedy

By FORREST D. COLBURN*

Christopher Clapham. *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 284 pp.

Dawit Wolde Giorgis. *Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia*. Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1989, 375 pp.

John W. Harbeson. *The Ethiopian Transformation*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1988, 239 pp.

Paul B. Henze. *Ethiopia: Crisis of a Marxist Economy: Analysis and Text of a Soviet Report*. Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1989, 83 pp.

Edmond J. Keller. *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People's Republic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988, 307 pp.

John Markakis. *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 314 pp.

Mekuria Bulcha. *Flight and Integration: Causes of Mass Exodus from Ethiopia and Problems of Integration in the Sudan*. Uppsala, Sweden: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988, 256 pp.

Mulatu Wubneh and Yohannis Abate. *Ethiopia: Transition and Development in the Horn of Africa*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1988, 224 pp.

Roy Pateman. *Eritrea: Even the Stones Are Burning*. Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1990, 239 pp.

ETHIOPIA—like China, Egypt, and Iran—is one of the oldest countries in the world. Its recorded history dawns in the millennium before Christ with the establishment of the Kingdom of Aksum, which was situated in the north of the country in what is now Tigray and Eritrea. Homer mentions Ethiopia in his chronicles. Indeed, the word *Ethiopia*, meaning land of the people with burnt faces, is, like the word *Egypt*, of Greek origin. At its zenith the Kingdom of Aksum was the most powerful state between the Roman Empire and Persia. Aksum's conversion to Christianity in the fourth century led to enduring ties with the Coptic church of Egypt and sporadic contact with Byzantium. Early

*Helpful comments on an earlier draft were offered by Henry Bienen, Milton Esman, Jeffrey Herbst, James McAdams, and Norman Uphoff.

European travelers were fascinated by Ethiopia and publicized the *Kibre Negest*, the epic that describes the founding of the Ethiopian nation, the glory of its monarchs, and their descent from King David of Israel through the union of Queen Sheba and David's son Solomon. Their son was Menelik I, king of Ethiopia. Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, King of Kings, Elect of God, traced his lineage to Menelik I, and so, too, to King David.

On the eve of the Ethiopian New Year in September 1974, Emperor Haile Selassie, nearing eighty-two, was bundled into a Volkswagen by a group of military officers and driven away from his palace to imprisonment. Since then Ethiopia—a country the size of France and Spain combined and the third most populous state on the African continent—has experienced a profound social revolution. The results have been horrifying. Probably nowhere else in the world is there such suffering. The government is guilty of gross human rights violations, including large-scale murder. The multinational polity is being wrecked by ever-increasing ethnic warfare. The carnage is overwhelming. The World Bank holds that per capita income has fallen steadily and that Ethiopia, always poor, is now the poorest country in the world. In 1984–85 a million Ethiopians starved to death, and only massive foreign assistance prevented the death of another eight million. Famine continues. Although only an estimated 12 percent of the population has ready access to roads, there are over two million Ethiopian refugees. What has happened? And why?

Recent books on Ethiopia answer the first question but stumble on the second. Ethiopia as a country and a polity presents numerous difficulties to scholars seeking to describe and explain what has befallen the nation-state. The central outline of events is transparent in recent scholarship. But the books that should be the most insightful, because of the theoretical ambitions of the authors, often disappoint because they obfuscate politics with abstract discussions of the "state." Discussions too quickly leap to a higher level of generality than warranted. The starkness of Ethiopia's politics demands analytical constructs that cling closer to political discourse and practice.

Mulatu and Yohannis[1] offer a descriptive account of Ethiopia that includes a succinct narration of how the military officers who ousted the emperor consolidated power and committed Ethiopia to Marxism-Leninism. Economy and society were reorganized according to the dictates of "scientific socialism." Slowly, the new regime institutionalized

[1] Ethiopians are usually referred to only by their first name.

itself: a loose committee of military officers under the leadership of Major Mengistu Haile-Mariam evolved first into the Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia and in turn into the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Comrade Mengistu's title evolved correspondingly: general secretary of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia, president of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, and commander in chief of the Revolutionary Armed Forces. In the most prosaic language, Mulatu and Yohannis also describe the two most pronounced outcomes of government initiative: ethnic rebellion and economic decline.

More theoretical works, such as those by Clapham, Keller, and Harbeson, strive to explain what has happened in Ethiopia. These three scholars openly share a theoretical reference: Theda Skocpol's comparative study of revolution in France, Russia, and China.[2] All speak approvingly of this study but suggestively appear to move away from Skocpol's structuralist interpretation of revolutions, which has its roots in Marxist analysis of class and capital. Ethiopia's leaders have drawn on the same Marxist fountainhead but more openly and with less nuance. Clapham is the bluntest about rejecting Marxist-inspired theories of revolution, even for regimes professing Marxism. He suggests an irony: "In an age in which revolution is almost invariably associated with Marxism (quite regardless of the inadequacy of Marxist precepts in explaining its occurrence)" (p. 6), there is no "necessary connection between revolution and any particular form of economic structure" (p. 2).

Clapham argues that it is political ineffectiveness, rather than economic exploitation, which leads to revolution. But what makes a revolution is not the destruction of the old order but the construction of the new one—of a new *political* order. Clapham holds that the primacy of the political is equally central to postrevolutionary institutionalization: "It is organized political power, in the hands of the new rulers of the state, that has to be used . . . to bring about a deliberate transformation of economy and society which would not take place on its own" (p. 7).

Clapham finds Skocpol's approach most compelling in its emphasis on the centrality of the control of state power in the early phase of the revolution and of state building in the latter phase. In this latter phase, Clapham takes revolutionaries' Leninism seriously: "The Leninist principle of democratic centralism appears to provide an extraordinarily effective mechanism for combining tightly centralized elite control with the cooptation of the able and ambitious, and at least a token level of mass partic-

[2] Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

ipation and democratic accountability" (p. 9). In contrast, Clapham dismisses ideology: "Ideology is generally (as Marx quite correctly identified it) a mere rationalization of the interests of its proponents" (pp. 9–10). Frankly, he says, "I remain unpersuaded of the centrality of ideology to revolutionary reconstruction" (p. 10).

Clapham has two other bones to pick. There is, he says, a misguided tendency to concentrate on the early, violent, and dramatic phase of the revolution, to the neglect of the period of institutionalization that follows. A second common weakness in the study of revolution is almost the converse of the first: a neglect, not only of what follows the first and heroic phase, but of what precedes it. "It is then all too easy to ascribe any particular manifestation of post-revolutionary attitudes or practices to the effects of revolution in itself, whether these be regarded as good or bad, while failing entirely to recognize the extent to which they duplicate pre-revolutionary equivalents" (p. 13).

Clapham's narration of the Ethiopian Revolution is richly detailed. But his analysis—and conclusions—are bound by an old-fashioned structural functionalism that often appears wooden. The following sentences are illustrative:

> It fell, not because it was badly damaged, but because it was by nature incapable of handling the increasing demands which were placed on it. (p. 32)
>
> In a society founded on a Hobbesian conception of the centrality of power relations to the maintenance of public order, the removal of a once-dominant authority figure always carried the threat of anarchy. (p. 43)
>
> In Addis Ababa, the failure of imperial authority unleashed an upsurge of demands which could not simply be suppressed, but for which some outlet had to be found. (p. 43)

All of these statements may, in some sense, be true, but they give little play to the drama of politics, of the centrality of choice. Slighted, if not ignored, are the influences of personality, political culture, ideas, leadership, organization, and institutions. Clapham comes close to succumbing to the same determinism for which he so persuasively chastises Marxists, only here the villain is not economic structures but the imperatives of government.

Not surprisingly, Clapham's conclusions are timid. There is no indictment. The first sentence of his conclusion reads, "Since 1974, and especially since the stabilization of the revolutionary regime in 1977–78, Ethiopians have found themselves part of a highly effective, disciplined and centralized state system" (p. 241). Well, yes. Only at the very end of

the book does he suggest that the coincidence in Ethiopia of the most powerful African state and the poorest African economy raises questions about the adequacy of the state as a motor of development. Continuing the metaphor (and the reification), he refers to the state as a machine:

> It is run for the most part efficiently, and often indeed with dedication. But the construction and operation of such a machine requires the subordination of all else to the needs of the machine itself, and especially its demands for control, in a way which ... often impedes production and fosters resistance. (p. 243)

The state—and those at its helm—are masked. No one is responsible for anything.

Harbeson, too, centers his analysis of Ethiopia on the state. He shares many of Clapham's theoretical precepts, including something of Clapham's structural functionalism. But the two dispute the strength of the postrevolutionary state: Clapham judges it strong; Harbeson claims that it is weak, even more so than the imperial regime. Accordingly, Harbeson argues that Ethiopia mirrors the course of conflict between the military regime and its adversaries. The military regime's initiatives have provoked multifaceted crises over the transformation, objectives, and even existence of a postimperial state.

Clapham and Harbeson disagree about the state largely because they define it differently: Clapham comes close to equating it with government; Harbeson follows Max Weber, who suggested that governmental institutions are not synonymous with the state but are derived instead from an underlying, generally recognized basis for political community (be it only shared territory).[3] Harbeson gives curt treatment to many political variables, but his broad definition of the state enables him to highlight conflict and, in particular, conflict for power. And he posits a curious, if murky, nexus between a strong government and a weak state.

Keller goes to greater lengths to disaggregate the state than either Clapham or Harbeson. Hence, he engages in less reification. Political actors are perceived as having choices and being influenced, not just by inert political economic structures, but also by ideas. Indeed, in seeking to explain the Ethiopian Revolution, Keller harks back to Crane Brinton's suggestion of the importance of "the allegiance of intellectuals."[4] Before the monarchy could be deposed, there had to be an alternative conception of how Ethiopia could be ruled. That alternative came from Ethiopian university students who had been radicalized in the

[3] Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organizations*, trans. Talcott Parsons (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1947), 156.

[4] Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (1938; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1965), 39.

1960s. Once the emperor was overthrown, there was "the challenge of introducing a new ideology, a new social myth, that would at once provide the basis for its legitimacy among the general population and serve as a guide for policy and political action" (p. 191). Students and the military engaged in a furious struggle for command of the state. Inevitably, the military won, but the students provided the new "social myth"—Marxism-Leninism.

Why did the military adopt the students' Marxism-Leninism? Was it because many of the younger military officers who staged the coup were also radicalized at Haile Selassie I University or elsewhere? Was it because the military officers genuinely believed students' rhetoric? Was it because they had no ideas of their own? Was it because it was a clever strategy for undercutting the appeal of the students, the only immediate rival to military leadership? Or was it because Marxism-Leninism justifies a ruling oligarchy and a statist development strategy?

These questions elude definitive answer. But it seems unnecessarily gross to dismiss Marxism-Leninism, as Clapham does, as only providing iconography (p. 97). At the least, Marxism-Leninism explains much of the *content* of the Ethiopian Revolution. Many institutions and policies are inspired by Marxism-Leninism or slavishly copied from regimes professing Marxism-Leninism. Indeed, in Ethiopia some of the regime's most consequential policies came directly from the inexperienced but militant students: the literacy campaign, the agrarian reform, and villagization. The institutions and policies shaped by Marxism-Leninism are not only important in their own right, but they also often have a decisive impact on the welfare, life chances, and political responses of different social groups. And the embrace of Marxism-Leninism by the country's leadership, whatever the motivation, has an impact on its ability to wield power. As the cagey Haile Selassie himself knew, certain ideologies, or social myths, facilitate one kind of rule as opposed to another.

If the ideas that inspire the "state" are to be taken seriously, so, too, those who actually make the decisions on which the state stands or falls should be taken seriously. Who are the leaders and how do they rule? How do powerful individuals guide and mediate institutional politics? This imperative is all the more compelling when, as in Ethiopia, a single individual all but publicly exclaims: *l'état, c'est moi*! Here Clapham, Harbeson, and Keller alike do not satisfy. Yes, all three describe Comrade Mengistu as ruthless, and all do trace his ascendancy to power. But there is not a sense for how Ethiopia is different for his singular presence. The difference between Mengistu and the government is not clarified. This and similar omissions are troubling.

A very different book, one that is most compelling, is Dawit's memoir, *Red Tears*. At the time of the emperor's ousting, Dawit Wolde Giorgis was a former military officer serving as deputy chief of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission. During the shift in Ethiopia's alignment from the United States to the Soviet Union, he served as deputy foreign minister. Subsequently, he became a member of the Central Committee of the Workers Party of Ethiopia and served as its principal political representative in Eritrea. He headed famine relief during the great famine of 1983–85. He left Ethiopia in 1986.

Given Dawit's background, one would expect a good story. And he does offer an engaging story. Eritreans have a decidedly less charitable interpretation of his tenure in Eritrea than he offers, but otherwise his tale is persuasive. Dawit covers the same ground tackled by his academic counterparts: the demise of imperial rule, the emergence and institutionalization of the new regime, ethnic conflict, and—above all—the famine. Predictably, his work is rich in details that only an insider could know:

> The hall where Mengistu holds large conferences is ironically the same hall where Emperor Haile Selassie used to give his big banquets—elaborately redecorated with Marxist icons, of course. Mengistu once confided to me that he enjoyed chairing meetings in this hall because he was able to sit right above the basement where all the former aristocrats whom he despised were imprisoned. As usual, Mengistu sat on an elevated, red velvet seat, not far from the throne of the former Emperor, now covered with a white sheet. I had always wondered why the throne had not been taken to the museum with all the rest of the imperial trappings; why it was still here draped in this sheet, as if its owner were merely off on a long holiday and might return at any moment. (p. 126)

But what is so striking about Dawit's book, for the academy at least, is the descriptive and explanatory success he achieves by eschewing the broad concept of the state.

As he links his own life to the unfolding of the Ethiopian Revolution, Dawit routinely explains how key decisions were made and with what effect. And in focusing on choices, he effortlessly shifts the "unit of analysis" as the need arises; he moves, for example, from a single individual—usually Mengistu—to bureaucratic infighting to broad social conflict. His inductive approach yields a revealing, complex portrayal of the Ethiopian Revolution. Three of the highlights are (1) the importance of ideology and the extent to which it was provided by the university community, (2) the dominance of Mengistu, and (3) the unnecessary suffering of Ethiopians, ranging from the dozens of Mengistu's fellow military

officers whom he executed to the unnamed masses of peasants who are victims of ill-conceived, counterproductive agrarian policies.

In comparison, the fixation on a single unit of analysis—the state—by Clapham, Harbeson, and, to a lesser extent, Keller, obscures these important features of the Ethiopian Revolution. Blame can perhaps be attributed to an unwarranted emulation of the theoretical precepts of heralded comparative studies, exemplified by the work of Crane Brinton, Barrington Moore, and Theda Skocpol.[5] Their books certainly deserve respect. It is fruitful to trace broad historical changes. But the theoretical parameters necessary for that kind of sweeping endeavor are probably ill suited to the analysis of a single, contemporary revolution. Speculating on the extent to which an incipient postrevolutionary regime is fulfilling the traditional responsibilities of the state is less useful than dissecting what kind of state it is in the first place. In short, focusing on the government is probably more useful than focusing on the state.

The primary reason for examining a revolutionary regime with more specificity and more attention to the conduct (as opposed to the outcome) of politics is to understand it more accurately. The nation-state can still be the subject of inquiry; there is no need to retreat into micro studies. And there is concurrently no need to retreat from theorizing. There are many puzzles worthy of explanation. Invoking the state—exploring its strength and autonomy—may prove necessary. But care is needed to correct what Sartori once called "conceptual stretching," by providing specificity to the logical and empirical properties of the state.[6] And care must be taken to guard against state centrism.

A second reason to disaggregate the "state" is to identify who bears responsibility for the tragedy, or tragedies, that Ethiopians have suffered. In a macrohistoric, comparative study of revolution, it is perhaps permissible to gloss over such cases as the Soviet famine of 1932–34 that killed five million or the Chinese famine of 1958–60 (the "Great Leap Forward") that killed ten million. But in contemporary Ethiopia—or Cambodia—where those responsible for famine are still potent political actors, it does not seem reasonable to speak so abstractly of governors.[7] Scholars may not have, or want the responsibility of judging right from wrong and of fingering the perpetrators of acts of gross immorality. Yet at the least, their work should make it clear who did what and with what

[5] Ibid.; Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966); Skocpol (fn. 2).

[6] Giovanni Sartori, "Concept Misinformation in Comparative Politics," *American Political Science Review* 64 (December 1970), 1033–53, at 1034.

[7] For a comprehensive study of the Kampuchean regime, see Karl Jackson, ed., *Cambodia 1975–1978* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

consequences for human welfare and life. Likewise, ideas, political passions, and ideologies that contribute to misery should be identified.

Ethnic Rebellion

Intertwined with the Ethiopian Revolution are dissident nationalist movements, or national liberation fronts, as they call themselves. The strongest such movement, the Eritrean, dates back to 1960 with the founding of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) by Muslim Eritreans educated—and politicized—in Nasser's Egypt. Haile Selassie's inability to solve the "Eritrean problem" led to dissatisfaction with the emperor within the ranks of Ethiopia's military. So Eritrean nationalism, and the war accompanying it, was a contributing cause of the revolution. But since the emperor was deposed, Eritrean nationalism has only swelled and has been matched by other dissident nationalist movements, most prominently in Tigray.[8]

The burden of ethnic strife is staggering. Impoverished Ethiopia is home to the world's longest running civil war—thirty years. Ethiopia marshals the largest military in Africa, and Eritrea has the eleventh largest army (Pateman, 121). Casualties from single battles have on occasion run into the tens of thousands. Much of northern Ethiopia is routinely either contested or controlled by the Eritrean or Tigrean liberation fronts. And there are sporadic efforts to heighten the national passions of other ethnic groups, including the Somali, the Afar, and the Oromo.

Clapham, Harbeson, and Keller discuss Ethiopia's ethnic strife. Suggestively, though, their efforts are limited to description. The three authors are versed in and committed to comparative analysis and social theory. But their interpretation of the role of comparative analysis and social theory in a single-country study is in overarching questions of the state. Unfortunately, they have not availed themselves of even the most celebrated comparative studies of ethnicity.[9] Had they set Ethiopia's ethnic strife within the framework of the literature on ethnicity, there would have been more depth to their treatment of this most vexatious problem. And they would likely have been prodded to delineate the

[8] Many names in Ethiopia do not have consistent spellings. Tigray is also written Tegray, Tegrai, and Tigre.

[9] The kind of work that could have been fruitfully consulted include Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Walker Connor, *The Nationalist Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Milton Esman, "The Management of Communal Conflict," *Public Policy* 21 (Winter 1973), 49–76; Eric Nordlinger, *Conflict Regulation in Divided Societies*, Occasional Paper no. 29 (Cambridge: Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 1972).

causes of ethnic rebellion and to consider the extent to which Ethiopia's strife is typical or atypical of other, similarly situated regimes.

The hopelessly inconclusive arguments for Ethiopia's "territorial integrity" and for Eritrean "self-determination" are spelled out, respectively, by Dawit and Pateman. Despite Dawit's disdain for the Ethiopian government, he supports its efforts to combat secessionist movements, arguing, for example, that Eritrea is historically and culturally an integral part of Ethiopia. He suggests that a sense of unity transcends differences of nationality. Indeed, Eritrea itself is composed of nine nationalities and is equally divided between Christians and Muslims. Dawit quotes foreign historians who maintain that by virtue of a shared national heritage Ethiopia managed to survive the forces of internal disintegration and remain the only part of Africa not colonized by Europeans.

The Italians did try to conquer Ethiopia. And although their advances were halted, they occupied the northern coast—Eritrea—for fifty years. Dawit decries Italian colonialism, which included a decree that "natives must take their shoes off when they go into government offices" (p. 75). Italian rule ended with British occupation in 1941. When the British left, they dismantled and took with them port facilities, railway rolling stock, factories, and equipment. In return they engineered a UN General Assembly recommendation that Eritrea should "constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian crown" (p. 79). Haile Selassie tried to yank the province back into his feudal domain.

The first sentence of Pateman's book reveals his perspective:

> Thinking back about the reasons for my interest in Eritrea, it seems that while a very young man of fifteen, I must first have read articles sympathetic to the Eritrean cause in British leftist journals written before the USSR decided to support Ethiopia's annexation of the country. (p. vii)

What follows is a well-researched, well-reasoned case for Eritrean independence. Arguing that "the struggle for independence also involves a struggle over history and the interpretation of the past," Pateman musters data showing that the histories of Eritrea and Ethiopia have often diverged (p. viii). He contends that Ethiopia has always been, and continues to be, disproportionately dominated by one ethnic group—the Amhara.

Pateman recounts the history of the ELF and of how it violently came to be replaced by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). (Ethnic parochialism was the first contradiction to emerge in the "national" liberation movement.) Much of the book is a grisly account of the chronol-

ogy of battles. In his conclusion, Pateman addresses one of the persistent international objections to Eritrean independence: small states are not viable. Here he is most persuasive:

> [Since UN mandated federation] ... over fifty countries with a smaller population and many with much fewer resources than Eritrea have become independent. In Africa, there are eighteen member states of the OAU with smaller populations than Eritrea; moreover some twenty micro states have been created in the Pacific and Caribbean. (pp. 211–12)

Small but viable states are held to be better than sprawling empires poorly governed and beset by domestic strife.

Markakis's study of nationalism in the Horn of Africa offers a more dispassionate analysis of the origins and evolution of dissident nationalism. Geographically and temporally his focus is broad. Following a profile of the region, successive chapters explore specific political movements "whose goal is to change the structure of the existing states in the Horn of Africa, or to establish states of their own" (p. xvii). Rich opportunities are afforded for comparative analysis.

Although Markakis shows the material inducements for dissident nationalism—most prominently, discrimination in government employment—he also points out that the leadership for both the Eritrean and Tigrean movements came almost entirely from the student population and was highly ideological:

> Eritreans in the university at Addis Ababa distinguished themselves by their political activism, and their immersion in the radical ideological currents that were beginning to surge in Ethiopian student circles in the mid-1960s. ... Many even among the older generation of educated Eritreans were to follow the example of the students who rallied to the nationalist movement almost as a body in the late 1960s. (p. 119)

Much discussed by students were Marx's views on the class origins of ethnic grievances and Lenin's views on the right of self-determination. Dawit reports that most Ethiopian students supported the Eritrean liberation movement because it was the only organized movement against Haile Selassie. According to Dawit, most reasoned that once Haile Selassie and the feudal system were overthrown, the national question and the question of self-determination would be solved by the eradication of class differences and the provision of equality and autonomy to all nationalities.

To students in the 1960s Ethiopia must have looked like the Russia Lenin denounced as "the tsar's prison of nations." But Lenin's writing on the nationalities question and the right of succession are ambiguous,

if not contradictory. Ugly disputes broke out over the correct interpretation, and discord mounted over the course of the Ethiopian Revolution. Failing to get what they wanted to Addis Ababa, students retreated to their native provinces and fanned dissident nationalism.

This interpretation of dissident nationalism, which emphasizes students and their ideas, is supported by Markakis's account of the founding of the second most powerful liberation movement, the Tigrean:

> Tigrai youths in the university in Addis Ababa were active in the student movement and were well represented in radical circles. . . . [T]he Tigrai radicals became involved in a running debate with their compatriots . . . on the relative importance of class and national contradictions. . . . After the seizure of power [by the military] they produced a pamphlet . . . with the ominous title "E tek" (To Arms) . . . and began forming an organization . . . to struggle for self-determination. The die had been cast precipitately it would appear, for the Tigrai radicals challenged not only the newly established military regime . . . but they also broke ranks with their Ethiopian radical comrades. . . . In emulation of the Eritreans . . . first base was established on a mountain. . . . The emerging guerrilla force . . . [consisted of] a hundred youths, most of them former students. (pp. 252–53)

Once again, ideology seems to provide more than iconography. And the ideology that resonated was Marxism-Leninism. Ironically, it emerged not from the university community's contact with the Soviet Union or with other socialist countries, but from ties to the U.S. and, to a lesser degree, to Western Europe.[10]

What remains unclear from recent scholarship is the extent to which the students' success can be traced to ethnic grievances as opposed to general dissatisfaction with Mengistu's regime. There must be something deficient or provocative in the way those who have governed this multinational system succeeded in fueling these rebellions. Unfortunately, no scholar provides much illumination on this key, albeit difficult, question.

Dawit is exceptional in this regard in that, for him, the resolution of ethnic rebellion depends, not on the Ethiopian "state," but on the caprice of a single individual—Mengistu. In his concluding discussion of the dissident nationalist movements, Dawit notes:

> From my observation of the capacity of these movements, their aspirations . . . the worst is yet to come and could lead to the breakup of the nation. Anarchy is descending over Ethiopia. In meeting after meeting, Mengistu has been told both politely and emotionally that we must look for alter-

[10] See Forrest Colburn, "The Tragedy of Ethiopia's Intellectuals," *Antioch Review* 47 (Spring 1989), 133–45.

natives to the military solution. He refuses and always predicts that the situation will get better soon. It always get worse. (p. 119)

ECONOMIC DECLINE

Even before the military officers who ousted the emperor committed themselves to scientific socialism, they began seizing control of the "commanding heights" of the Ethiopian economy. Industrial, financial, and commercial enterprises were nationalized. And the state assumed near control over foreign trade. In addition to nationalizing major urban-based firms, five thousand commercial farms were nationalized. Although they represented only a small percentage of land under cultivation, commercial farms monopolized the production of such important crops as sugar and cotton. Finally, the government conferred on itself broad authority to regulate what remained of the private sector and to begin laying the foundations for central planning.

Arguably more important, however, have been government initiatives toward peasant agriculture. Ethiopia is not only a decidedly agrarian economy but one dominated by peasants. Agriculture provides 80 percent of employment and 85 percent of exports. Peasants farm about 96 percent of cultivated land. They produce 90–94 percent of the cereals, pulses, and oilseeds, and about 98 percent of the coffee, the most important export.[11] Given the incipient level of modernization in Ethiopia, progress depends overwhelmingly on the health of agriculture. Obversely, any failure in the sector results in hardship because the bulk of the population lives so close to subsistence.

In early 1975, the new regime promulgated land reform: all rural land was nationalized without compensation; tenancy was abolished; the hiring of wage labor on private farms was forbidden; all commercial farms were to remain under state control; and all peasants were to have "possessing right" to a plot of land not exceeding ten hectares (roughly twenty-five acres).[12] The reform was welcome in the southern part of Ethiopia, where tenancy was common and rural elites were exploitative. But there was some resistance in northern provinces, where communal ownership was typical and large holdings and tenancy were exceptions. The regime promptly organized peasants into peasant associations. In

[11] Figures are from Steven Franzel et al., "Grain Marketing Regulations: Impact on Peasant Production in Ethiopia," *Food Policy* 14 (November 1989), 347–58, at 348.

[12] The Provisional Office for Mass Organizational Affairs; Agitation, Propaganda and Education Committee, *Basic Documents of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Addis Ababa: Provisional Office for Mass Organizational Affairs; Agitation, Propaganda and Education Committee, 1977), 18–47.

light of the poverty of Ethiopia and the inexperience of the new government, the successful organization of peasants in every corner of the country outside those areas held by rebels was an extraordinary accomplishment, even if it was done with the threat of coercion to those expressing reluctance. Initially, it appeared as if the peasant organizations would provide an institutional basis for rural development and self-help activities. They have been used mostly as an instrument for government policies motivated by a quixotic combination of ideological impulses and a pragmatic need to extract resources.

All macroeconomic indicators suggest that the Ethiopian economy has deteriorated in the postrevolutionary epoch. The poor economic performance can be explained in part by severe resource constraints, aggravated by secessionist movements, conflict with Somalia, drought, and world economic trends. Yet the depth, persistence, and uniformity of economic difficulties suggests that government policies are at fault, too. Problems have emerged even on state farms where the government has considerable autonomy and is well endowed with resources. An Ethiopian study reports:

> During a working visit ... Chairman Mengistu ... noted with heavy concern the shortcomings of the state farms and how the performance and operations of the state agro-industrial activities were far from desirable and at times catastrophic.[13]

Since 1974 annual growth in agricultural production has only been about 1 percent. Population growth has been approximately three times as high, resulting in declining per capita production.

Surveys of peasants have revealed that the production of foodstuffs has been thwarted by forced requisitions of harvests at low prices and by unwelcome efforts to promote collective farming.[14] And the nationalization of land means that no household has any incentive to improve the land in ways that would safeguard, or increase, its productivity. Peasant associations are unable to influence government policy, leaving peasants with no alternative except flight or foot dragging. Proverbial expressions of resignation abound: "The son of the Blue Nile is thirsty"; "Whether there are one or two lactating cows, my cup of milk is the same, says the cat"; "May our great God help us."

Paul Henze, a frequent commentator on Ethiopia, presents in pub-

[13] Johannes Kinfu, "Towards Understanding the Public Corporation, and/or Public Enterprise, State Enterprise in a Socialist Industrial Transformation and to Provide Proper Accounting for It" (Mimeo, Addis Ababa, 1980), 25.

[14] See, for example, Dessalegn Rahmato, *Agrarian Reform in Ethiopia* (Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1985); and Franzel (fn. 11).

lished form a lengthy Soviet report on the Ethiopian economy. The 1985 report was authored by advisers from the Soviet State Planning Commission (GOSPLAN). As with all correspondence between the Soviet Union and Ethiopia, it was written in English. As Henze points out in his introduction, the report was prepared before Gorbachev's reforms were implemented; indeed, Gorbachev had been general secretary for less than six months at the time the report was completed. Yet the report criticizes the Ethiopian regime's reliance on state control of the economy, disinterest in the private sector, neglect of prices, and attempted collectivization of the peasantry. The hallmarks of Marxist-Leninist economics were dismissed as being counterproductive by the official representatives of the most advanced—and experienced—socialist state.

Mekuria examines the fate of those who have fled Ethiopia, usually by walking to neighboring Sudan or Somalia, two countries with enormous problems of their own. He claims that Ethiopian refugees constitute half of all refugees in Africa. The tale of Ethiopian refugees is sad. Flight is an option only for those who live close to the borders, and it is exceedingly risky. For those who reach the border, other difficulties present themselves. In one survey of settlements in Sudan, 30 percent of the children died during their first year in the country (p. 141). Integration into other societies is elusive.

More commonly, desperate peasants migrate from the heart of the country to the cities. Ethiopia's noted scholar Dessalegn Rahmato writes passionately of these migrations:

> The mass migration of peasants to the urban areas carries . . . a variety of meanings and messages. To begin with, it is a form of collective articulation of the demand for the consecration of the right to life, a right which requires the satisfaction of the most elementary needs of individuals and communities, namely food. Secondly, it is a form of silent protest. The migration of thousands of peasants from the vast recesses of the countryside where they are "invisible" to the road side towns there they are highly visible contains a clear but unexpressed message: state and society have no political or moral right to write us off, or to ignore our plight![15]

Given the secrecy of the Ethiopian government, the size and diversity of the country, and the paucity of reliable data even in the desks of ranking bureaucrats, the books reviewed here do a commendable job of delineating the economic woes of postrevolutionary Ethiopia. But again, the lack of comparative or theoretical analysis of specific characteristics

[15] Dessalegn Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies* (Addis Ababa: Institute of Development Research, 1987), 188–89.

of the polity, such as economic mismanagement, is disappointing.[16] Abstract discussions of "state strength" or "state softness" are a poor substitute.

Conclusion

Studies of individual countries remain the most common work of scholars in the field of comparative politics. The motivation and rationale for the study of particular countries are clear and enduring. But prestige and sometimes, unfortunately, even legitimacy within the ranks of scholars is accorded to those who engage in cross-national studies. Even scholars who write about China, a country of over a billion inhabitants, are sometimes asked to justify "the larger significance of their work." To enrich their studies, satisfy their own curiosity, and disarm critics, scholars of individual countries routinely engage in comparative analysis. They do so with varying levels of commitment and skill. But there does seem to be a tendency, exemplified by recent scholarship on Ethiopia, to follow the dictates of academic fashion and pitch comparative inquiries to the highest level of generality—the state and the state system.

Grand statements about the state may well have utility for comparative macrohistory and for overarching societal theory. They are, however, entirely unsuitable for a single-country study. These must first and foremost present solid information about what really happened in the specific context, identifying the principal actors—individuals and groups—and analyzing and attempting to account for their behavior. Comparative analysis and social theory can be helpful, even necessary, for the task. But both are most profitably employed to help illuminate specific phenomena and processes, such as the conduct of government, communal politics, and economic management. The available "literature" encompasses far more than billowing discussions of the state.

Less abstraction is likely to result in more penetrating studies of individual polities. It is also likely to raise, on occasion, the hitherto neglected question of moral responsibility, as "sweeping historical forces" are replaced by choices made by individuals or groups. Contemporary African states are commonly said to be more or less, mostly more, misgoverned by incompetent and predatory rulers—the consequence of colonialism or neocolonialism, lack of indigenous institutions, insufficient experience, and cultural disabilities. According to this logic, Ethiopia is just another

[16] An example of the kind of comparative analysis that could be profitably consulted is David Morawetz, "Economic Lessons from Some Small Socialist Developing Countries," *World Development* 8 (May–June 1980), 337–69.

victim of these powerful, impersonal forces. Such explanations are suspect. The scholarship on Ethiopia reviewed here, despite its shortcomings, suggests an unrelieved chronicle of misgovernment that ought to be charged to those who have perpetuated it. Neither the brutal and continuing violations of human rights, nor the ethnic rebellions, nor the collapse of the economy were foreordained or historically inevitable. They were caused and certainly aggravated by Ethiopia's ruling elites, including the tragic conjunction of a military clique imposing Stalinist patterns of economic management. If students of politics are to regard political actors as morally responsible individuals, rather than products of impersonal historical forces, then the quality of their stewardship is indeed a matter that scholars should be willing to observe, analyze, and, yes, judge. Elites may be constrained by their circumstances, but they retain large degrees of freedom. And for the exercise and consequences of that freedom they should be held morally responsible.