

Reviews

Solidarity to fraternity

Elleni Centime Zeleke, *Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964-2016* (Leiden and Boston: Brill/Haymarket, 2019/2020). 281pp., £135 hb., £20 pb., 978 9 00441 475 4 hb., 978 1 64259 341 9 pb.

One objective of Elleni Centime Zeleke's *Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964-2016* is to trace the contours of the nationalities question in Ethiopia today. First pronounced in the pages of literature produced by student movement activists mobilised against the government of Haile Selassie during the 1960s, the nationalities question concerns the terms of inclusion for different identities in the modern Ethiopian state. Ideas from that literature resurfaced in the 1995 constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Under the stewardship of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and following the overthrow of the Derg regime in 1991, the 1995 constitution forged a new system of regional federalism according to which control over land corresponded with designated national identities.

Just as *Ethiopia in Theory* appeared in print in November 2019, prime minister Abiy Ahmed inaugurated the Prosperity Party. The move broke a nearly three-decades long political consensus. At the time of writing, the country is embroiled in a civil war pitting Eritrean forces, Amhara militias and the apparatus of the state against various parties representing Oromo federalist interests and the former leaders of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The civil war would presumably end if the Tigrayan and Oromo leadership acquiesced to the dictates of individual citizenship regardless of identity, relinquishing claims to collective autonomy and land embedded in the 1995 constitution. The Prosperity Party, in other words, has sought to dismantle the country's federalist system in favour of a centralised state. Implicitly, the wager demands submission to a single national identity. As with all liberal states, aspirational or otherwise, abstract talk of universal equality and rule of law papers over enduring historical hierarchies.

Political theorists tend to address comparable events with recourse to the ninth chapter in Hannah Arendt's influential *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Titled 'The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man', Arendt's chapter deems nationalism an errant project. At best, she argues, it creates minorities forced to assimilate to the dominant identity of the state where they reside. Otherwise, nationalism fosters stateless populations, the condition that rendered possible mass atrocities and genocide during the Second World War. In response, Arendt champions rule of law and constitutionalism, calling for reconfiguration of the state form to preclude the violence inherent in different iterations of the national question.

But Arendt's assessment appears insufficient with regard to recent events in Ethiopia. On the one hand, Abiy's government posits a statist repudiation of seemingly undue privilege afforded disparate nationalities. On the other hand, the same government registers a nationalist repudiation of past technocratic statecraft. How, then, is Ethiopia navigating seemingly opposed precepts between the hyper-rationalism characteristic of technocratic statecraft and the irrationalism of national chauvinism? What histories shape the ongoing Ethiopian pursuit of modern nation-state ideals? What is the Ethiopian nation-state in its specificity? *Ethiopia in Theory* gives readers a method to think through these questions and to reassess the nationalities question as a question. This is its enduring contribution.

Consider an announcement from the Ethiopian Students Association in North America (also known as the Ethiopian Students Union in North America or ESUNA) directed toward the Iranian Students Association (ISA). I found the announcement in 2013, tucked among a cache of papers in the basement of a private home on

the outskirts of Tehran. The documents were part of a collection that once belonged to Ahmad Shayegan, later preserved by his eldest son Ali. Ahmad's father, Ali's namesake, was a close friend and ally of Mohammad Mossadegh. He served as one of Mossadegh's lawyers when the prime minister appeared before the International Court of Justice and the United Nations in 1952 to defend the nationalisation of Iranian oil. An MI6 and CIA engineered coup toppled Mossadegh's government one year later, relegating the former prime minister to house arrest for the remainder of his life. The elder Ali Shayegan chose exile in the United States where he lived, raised a family, and helped organise a movement in opposition to the post-coup government.

That movement, spearheaded in the US by the Iranian Student Alliance (ISA), worked in collaboration with groups like the Ethiopia Student Union in North America (ESUNU). Ahmad Shayegan was one of the ISA's founding members and at some point served on its five-person secretariat, which included a seat to establish relations with external organisations. Iranian students' affiliations with Ethiopian students occurred through this channel. Ahmad was equally active in political organisations separate from the ISA but whose members attempted to recruit cadres and sympathetic followers from within the student group. These political organisations inherited and expanded the elder Shayegan's project of national liberation into a Marxist politics. The Organisation of the National Front of Iran Abroad (Middle East Branch) which would later become the Star Group [*Gurūh-i Sitārih*], the Communist Alliance Group [*Gurūh-i Ittihādīyih-yi Kumūnistī*], and finally the Organisation of Communist Unity [*Sāzmān-i Vahdat-i Kumūnistī*] pioneered transnational activism among Iranians. It seems appropriate that this document would be in Ahmad's personal collection.

The announcement employs two historically loaded terms for the relationship between Iranian and Ethiopian student activists. The first is 'solidarity': 'The ETHIOPIAN STUDENTS ASSOCIATION IN NORTH AMERICA fully supports this demonstration against the SHAH of IRAN; it expresses its solidarity with the IRANIAN STUDENTS ASSOCIATION IN THE U.S.' The second is 'fraternity':

The Shah of Iran and Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia are birds of the same feather. Both are heads of corrupt

and oppressive regimes; both are loyal servants of the American Empire. Iranian and Ethiopian students are thus committed to a common struggle against autocracy and imperialism. We are convinced that the bond of fraternity created between them during the initial phase of their struggles shall grow into a stronger revolutionary alliance linking the peoples of Iran and Ethiopia for the purpose of promoting the national liberation efforts of the THIRD WORLD.

Are solidarity and fraternity synonymous? Did the flyer's authors intentionally vary the language in question merely as a matter of style? Or does form – and hence the difference between these terms – matter for politics?

It would seem that solidarity and fraternity are distinct, the former limited to acts of articulation: 'the Ethiopian Students Association in North America ... expresses its solidarity with the Iranian Students Association in the US' (emphasis mine). One can express solidarity at little to no cost. Once upon a time, student activists held congresses where they read aloud solidarity statements from peer organisations to roaring applause. Nowadays multinational corporations, sports leagues and enterprising government officials (the leaders of the post-revolutionary state in Iran prominent among them) can declare that Black Lives Matter without making any substantial changes to prisons or policing. Substantial change requires more effort to cultivate shared affect: '... the bond of fraternity created between them during the initial phase of their struggles *shall grow* ...' One of the ideological pillars of the post-revolutionary French republic, this bond intimates an enduring process during which a new affiliation is formed. According to political philosopher and social theorist Andreas Esheté, in his 1981 essay 'On Fraternity' especially, fraternity is alive – experiential, social, relational. It concerns affective and sentimental bonds developed over time through shared experience. In the 'relationship of daily life and under ordinary conditions', one 'habitually recognises that the community is one's substantive groundwork and end.' Andreas, it should be noted, played a prominent role in the ESUNU during the 1960s and 1970s and later helped shape the 1995 post-Derg constitution.

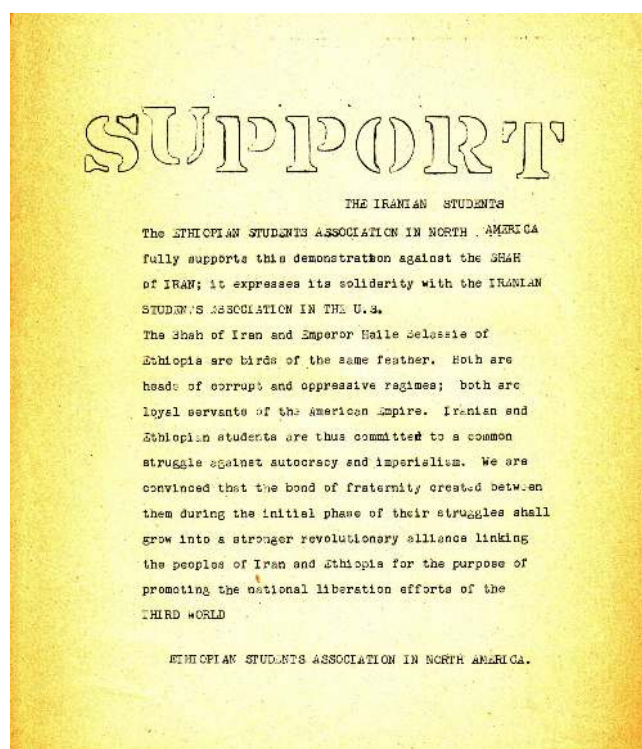
His distinction between solidarity and fraternity maps neatly onto the distinction between content and form operating at the core of Elleni's *Ethiopia in Theory*. For positivist social scientists, conventionally speaking,

form and method are a passive medium, a canvas on which to paint content and meaning. The scientists locate human life in *what* they say. *How* they say it is a dead letter, meant to vanish on arrival. For Elleni, form and method track the life of the knowledge producer, the social and historical lifeworld the researcher bears, the possessions they haul to every exchange. How do researchers come to know the past given the past lives among us in the present? How does the language of the social sciences obscure the truth, given that revolutions almost without exception are messy affairs? 'The task is not to predict the future based on an experience of the past', Elleni argues, 'but to re-open the future through confronting in theory and practice the unresolved contradictions of the past as it shapes the present'. *Ethiopia in Theory* does not just tell, it shows, eschewing pretensions to authorial independence and objectivity. The author places herself centre-stage for readers to observe universal theory grow from her embodied, situated knowledge.

The book enacts its argument, which is to say its method. Each page weaves together immanent critiques of Ethiopian revolutionary historiography and postcolonial theories of knowledge production. Elleni inhabits the interlocution; she listens and she layers. The resulting tapestry mirrors the sedimentation of experience, from the settling dust of upheaval into the illusion of time having moved on. But the book does not simply add another universalism alongside others. It digs into the specificity of knowledge production about the Ethiopian revolution, which includes the author's own vulnerabilities, to reach for a new universal.

Form matches content: as Elleni theorises, forlorn student movement activists appear as creative and generative political theorists. Beginning in the 1960s, these students debated in the pages of *Challenge*, a publication distributed in the US and Canada. Their debates would later (and quite remarkably) infiltrate the corridors of policy-making in the post-revolutionary state. Student movement activists created a notion of scientific progress specific to Ethiopia. To this day scientific discourse holds authority in the Horn of Africa, evidenced by the universalist technocratic pretensions of the current state. Abstract and ahistorical prescriptions for future policy fan the flames of ethnic conflict, bearing witness to the charge that the form of the students' initiatives endured even as they abandoned its original Marxist content after

the Cold War. Like the immanent critiques of historiography and postcolonial theory performed throughout, Elleni reads these activist theorists generously, praising their creativity while pointing out flaws in their thinking. The students' Marxist intent remains, their commitment to scientism filtered away. *Ethiopia in Theory* searches for a method to embrace Marxism, instead of rejecting it because of what its proponents later engendered.



Just as Marx chastises classical political economy for exclusively focusing on content, Elleni repudiates the formal conventions of knowledge production. Her book does not recover Marxism as mere statement (an *expression* of solidarity), rather it embodies a Marxist spirit of creation (a phenomenological bond of fraternity). Returning to the Marxist theory at the root of contemporary Ethiopian politics accords with Elleni's understanding of Marxist theory at its core. If universal human nature is to construct and create (as Marx contends in his notion of species-being), then a return to Marx resists the ascription of primordial identity plaguing the nationalities question in contemporary Ethiopian politics. The endeavour requires Elleni echo her subjects' form. She too must be creative, but in her own right. *Ethiopia in Theory* shows how a mode of inquiry taken for granted as common sense transformed common sense by creating its own form.

What does this book, articulating this method, have to say about the nationalities question today? What can it offer those reflecting on events that took place since it was published? *Ethiopia in Theory* abjures predication as an enterprise and yet somehow manages to anticipate later events. The nationalities question, for Elleni, refers to the colonial and imperial effects of modern state formation in the Horn of Africa. This story invariably concerns knowledge produced about the state. A first wave of Ethiopian national historiography shaped by colonial institutions exalted centralisation, privileging the Abyssinian and Amharic-speaking region at the expense of other populations. A newer trend in historical writing, shaped by the student movement against Haile Selassie, aspired to counter unequal representations and attendant power imbalances. It comprised an inversion, fostering scholarship on the primordial identities of marginalised populations. Student movement-inspired scholarship was cast onto contemporary Ethiopian politics. Evoking Partha Chatterjee, Elleni shows how the resulting pluralisation of national identities in scholarship and politics alike preserved nationalism and colonial rule by perpetuating nationalist and colonial ways of thinking. She thus proposes to re-assess the nationalities question. Rejecting the premise of an internal debate between different ethnic groupings, *Ethiopia in Theory* recalls a history where the student movement first articulated nationalism to 'relate the Ethiopian nation-state to a capitalist world system'. How did this thought come to be internalised, she asks? And where was its internationalism lost?

Revolutions tend to exacerbate ruptures and contradictions. Positivist social scientists assume we can sew the tears together if equipped with precise classificatory schemas. Elleni is more inclined to revisit past wounds. To dwell in them, she claims, is to assemble alternatives that repudiate the convergence of science and politics. For instance, *Ethiopia in Theory* is concerned with the presumption that abstract policy prescriptions formulated in remote locales can helicopter into a place like Ethiopia without regard for local life.

Does this political goal require a wholesale rejection of positivism? Must authors writing about revolutions adopt a revolutionary disposition? Must their form necessarily match their content? We can write increasingly accurate and truthful accounts of social and political phenomena so long as we accept certain limits. Elleni asks a

larger, and I believe, more courageous, question – what does it mean to be academic? She asks it of the Ethiopian student movement and its legacies, of the knowledge production shaping Ethiopian politics since the revolution, but also of herself and us. Historical writing presumes a separation between past and present sufficient to facilitate insights past actors themselves could not see. To say the present is haunted by the past is to propose that this imagined separation is in fact untruthful. Either our first step is blindness and everything thereafter an attempt to conceal our missteps or we grope about in the dark, open our other senses, acclimate to the dim light, inhabit.

Ethiopia in Theory does not conceal past mistakes. It layers. To perfunctory readers, the book may appear to be an extended literature review. It is and it is not: its object of study is social scientific literature. It is a literature review that does the work literature reviews conventionally occasion while reaching beyond the survey. To unreflective readers, the book may appear impressionistic. It is and it is not: it centres subjective experience as world historical. Paul Ricoeur teaches that narrative is the human experience of time. Lived human experience does not neatly divide into past, present and future. In Elleni's narrative, the historian cannot in good faith stand aloof from the past.

For skeptics, the adoption of a revolutionary disposition to write about revolution, the matching of content with form, may look like historical writing 'out of joint with itself'. David Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity*, a book of consequence to Elleni's argument, argues that different generations pose different kinds of questions and answers. They inhabit different 'problem-spaces' because past, present and future are distinct. Historical writing falters, Scott concludes, when anticolonial questions-and-answers address our postcolonial predicament – when romantic narratives characteristic of past revolutionary endeavours propose final solutions in lieu of the tragically partial questions and answers suited to our present. The impulse to match form with content threatens to repeat the misstep against which Scott admonishes. How, after all, could the children of revolutions – people like Elleni and myself – occupy the same 'problem-space' as the generation of Andreas Esheté and Ahmad Shayegan? Elleni concedes that we do not. And yet, for her, the distinction Scott presumes between past and present is too neat – despite Scott's critique of posit-

ivist narrative arcs in historiography, his conception of historical time still too positivist. Taking her cue from *Conscripts of Modernity*, Elleni writes a tragic narrative but without presuming incommensurable differences between past, present and future. We may not share the same 'problem-space' as the generations that came before us, but we share the same structuring antagonisms. The passage of time alone does not resolve racial capitalism or colonial power. Our present is haunted.

And so, Elleni asks her own questions: How does the past live in *her* present and what does *she* need to do in order to liberate herself from it? To read these as strictly personal questions and thus reduce *Ethiopia in Theory* to memoir is to fall back into the policed designations of positivist social science, to think hauntings are individual phenomena. It is to lose sight of Elleni's argument. If a shared past haunts a shared present, memoir is theory.

Does Elleni's method – which is to say, her argument – travel? Five years after the Ethiopian revolution, while its former student activists were mired in an earlier civil war, the Iranians for whom they declared their support embarked upon an unanticipated revolutionary journey of their own. Can the children of Iran's revolution adopt Elleni's method to settle accounts with the past that haunts our present? Where does specificity give way to a new universal? What kind of knowledge production could forge bonds of fraternity between the children of the Ethiopian and Iranian revolutions?

Frantz Fanon – who celebrated internationalism in his writings and who endures as a magnet for international solidarity movements to this day – saw fraternity and solidarity otherwise. As Anuja Bose demonstrates, the Martinican psychiatrist and Algerian revolutionary, posthumously turned into the canonical scribe of race and decolonisation on the African continent, rejected fraternity as if shedding a straightjacket. The French tricolor championed fraternity but imposed restrictions on membership in its imagined national family: only white men could be brothers. The strictures inspired nausea in Fanon, a condition from which he sought relief in the felt experience of life and, inverting anti-Black racism, the affirmations afforded by the continued physical presence of his body. He discovered his humanity risking death

alongside Algerians in their struggle for independence against French settler colonial rule. Solidarity bred life where fraternity denied his existence.

Describing *les damnés*, his heroic protagonist in 1961's *The Wretched of the Earth*, he writes:

In this atmosphere of brotherly solidarity and armed struggle, men link arms with their former enemies. The national circle widens and every new ambush signals the entry of new tribes. Every village becomes a free agent and a relay point. Solidarity among tribes, among villages and at the national level is first discernible in the growing number of blows dealt to the enemy. Every new group, every new volley of cannon fire signals that everybody is hunting the enemy, everybody is taking a stand.

Les damnés stretched the revolutionary force of the French Third Estate and transformed it into a project for the Third World. According to Bose, he envisioned an 'international populism', uniting people across nation-state borders by virtue of like experiences of national solidarity forged in common struggles for independence: 'Iranian and Ethiopian students are thus committed to a common struggle against autocracy and imperialism.'

We are today experiencing a renewed commitment to decolonisation as protests against police murder in the U.S. spur solidarity marches across the globe. At times, these actions culminate in displays of symbolic power, from the renaming of a street to the toppling of a former colonial official enshrined in bronze and stone. Each defaced and dismembered statue in a postcolonial metropolis faintly recalls the acts of violence described in *The Wretched of the Earth*. The colonised, Fanon claimed, must perform acts of violence to sense their emerging independence. Now, the colonists' bodies are petrified symbols looming over the squares where daily life circulates. One symbol begets another. Movements demand and often readily receive expressions of solidarity. The ease with which those expressions are exchanged, however, threatens to undermine meaningful unity forged through shared, visceral experience. We are only beginning to confront 'in theory and practice' these 'unresolved contradictions'. We are yet 'to re-open the future' of our shared horizon. The spirit of Fanon's call to arms, dependent as it was on experience, may just require fraternity again.

Arash Davari