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1

The Rise of Student Radicalism in Ethiopia

As in Russia, China, Cuba, and elsewhere, students and intellectuals have been the carriers of revolutionary ideology in Ethiopia. By all accounts, by the mid-1960s Haile Selassie I University had become the center of a student movement that was rapidly gathering momentum toward extreme forms of political activism. The African scholar Ali A. Mazrui, who gave a talk to the student body in December 1973, characterized Ethiopian students as “the most radical African students [he] had ever addressed.”¹ Any study of the causes of the Ethiopian Revolution must, therefore, begin by establishing the factors that led to the progressive radicalization of Ethiopian students and intellectuals. One basic reason the elaboration and implementation of a reformist agenda was prevented, at the crucial moment when the imperial regime became weak enough to accept the necessity of serious reforms, was undoubtedly the strong opposition of students and intellectuals, who were committed to nothing less than Marxist-Leninist socialism.

Conditions favorable to reformist solutions had indeed emerged when in February 1974, following social and military protests, Haile Selassie dismissed the old cabinet and nominated Endalkatchew Makonnen as the new prime minister. The latter formed a new cabinet and promised changes, including a land reform proposal. The nomination of Endalkatchew confirms that Haile Selassie had finally understood the necessity of reforms. Unfortunate for the possibility of making reforms, the military overthrew the new prime minister under the pretext of appeasing the continuous protests of students against him. The protests were ultimately ideologically driven, as evidenced, for instance, when “on March 11 (1974), thousands of students demonstrated, and burned the effigy of Prime Minister Endalkatchew Makonnen. For the first time, they openly called for the formation of a ‘People’s Government.’”²

Factors of Student Radicalization

Studies analyzing the causes of student activism abound. To limit ourselves to those dealing with student movements in third world countries, activism is generally attributed to social as well as psychological and intellectual factors. Many studies even recognize protest as an established function of students in transitional societies. As Seymour M. Lipset notes, "In the underdeveloped countries, university students do not just prepare themselves for future roles in public life; they play a significant part in the political life of their countries even during their student period."³ The reasons for the high level of student activism in the developing world are not hard to find: the weakness of the middle class, the absence of representative governments, bans on political parties and freedom of expression, and the use of repressive methods of government concur in making students "the bearers of public opinion."⁴ In developed countries, students need not become the voice of the people, given that the practice of democracy allows parties and groups such as labor unions to express social protests and fight for reforms. Student demonstrations, no doubt frequent in developed countries, often reflect dissident positions that political parties are reluctant to support.

According to many scholars, one factor that encourages the politicization of students is the special treatment that universities usually receive from third world governments. While such governments are quick to repress labor unions and political parties, they typically take "a permissive attitude toward student values and activity" by granting a relative autonomy to their institutions of higher education.⁵ A number of reasons explain this special treatment. First, so long as student protests remain confined to campuses and do not spill over into other social sectors, dictatorial governments see no serious threat to their power. Students can neither paralyze the economic life of the country nor constitute an insurrectional force able to remove a government. Second, the embedded link between academic freedom and higher education does not allow a purely repressive policy: short of closing universities, governments have no direct way to shield students from critical ideas. Third, governments acquire a bad reputation when they crack down on universities. It is as though they come up against the advancement of knowledge and free research, not to mention the damage inflicted to the national prestige, which is often symbolized by the erection of a sumptuous university amid urban destitution. Even dictatorial regimes resent being perceived as opponents of enlightenment.

No less conducive to political activism is campus life itself. That a large number of students find themselves "at one location, with similar interests, and subject to similar stimuli from the environment gives a powerful impetus to organizational activities of all kinds."⁶ Indeed, the concentration of a

large number of students in a relatively isolated location makes communication easy, and so fosters organizational schemes. Ideas spread rapidly and without expensive means, as it is easy to distribute leaflets and organize meetings. What is more, the fact of living together in a secluded environment develops a spirit of solidarity that results in the adoption of common attitudes to external stimuli. We cannot emphasize enough the impact of the development of common attitudes. In addition to creating “a more cohesive community from which to recruit members,” the spirit of solidarity drives the majority of students to support the initiatives or the views of a minority, even if they do not individually subscribe to them.⁷ A further reason the majority tends to follow the lead of minority groups is that campus life means emancipation from parental authority. The remoteness of parents creates a void of authority that exposes many students to peer influence, especially that of senior students. The development of solidaristic attitudes thus greatly benefits organized and active groups: it facilitates recruitment, just as it tends to prompt the alignment of the majority to the views of activist students.

Scholars of student politics readily connect the tendency to radicalization with the very characteristics of youth. Since “hope and idealism tend to be more a feature of youth than of age,” radicalization and the very idea of revolution resonate with youth.⁸ Unlike older people, who tend to hold moderate or conservative views, the young are generally attracted by magnanimous ideas. They are especially more sensitive to the suffering of the poor and the lack of justice than any other age group. Aristotle codified the contrast between youth and old age. He found that the young have strong passions and are hot-tempered; they are also generous and trustful as well as courageous and open to noble ideals. By contrast, “the character of Elderly Men—men who are past their prime—may be said to be formed for the most part of elements that are the contrary of all these.”⁹ Likewise, unlike older people, the lessons of experience, to wit, harsh realities dashing generous aspirations, have not yet hardened the young. While old people are wiser, young people have yet to learn how little reality and idealism make good company. The lack of such responsibilities as making a living and raising a family further assists the idealism of youth. Having not yet developed a vested interest in the social system, they can be easily fired up by revolutionary ideas, just as they can afford the risks of political activism.

Many authors have emphasized how the exposure of third world students to Western education greatly exacerbates the natural tendency of the young to assert their independence by defying existing authorities, especially parental authority. While in developed countries the young and their parents share more or less the same culture, in transitional societies the assimilation of modern education induces the young not only to adopt alien values but also to have contempt for traditions to which their parents are still attached.

This cultural dissociation gives generational conflict such an acute and distressing form that it pushes the young toward revolutionary ideologies. For what else could better express their aggravated rebellion than the adoption of ideas that radically question the traditional society of their parents?

That is why Lewis S. Feuer insists that youth idealism is not enough to explain the radicalization of student movements. A thorough explanation requires the addition of another motivation, namely, the conflict of generations. "The distinctive character of student movements arises from the union in them of motives of youthful love, on the one hand, and those springing from the conflict of generations on the other," he says.¹⁰ While enthusiasm, generosity, self-sacrifice—in a word, idealism—are features of a distinct biological stage, generational conflicts add the social component necessary to detonate the idealist impulse.

Granted the importance of sociopsychological, academic, and biological factors, the study of student radicalization must not lose sight of the decisive impact of social discontent. Commitment to a radical change of the social system is not intelligible outside the heavy presence of social problems. Even if we concede that radical groups are bound to appear regardless of the performances of governments, such groups remain isolated without the dissatisfaction of the majority of students with existing conditions of life. For instance, whatever be the part played by cultural crises, youth radicalization in the United States and France during the late 1960s would not have had the scope it had without the war in Vietnam and France's educational crisis. For radical groups to grow and assume the leadership of student movements, the disaffection of the majority of the student body is a necessary precondition.

Equally true is the understanding that, no matter how grave social problems are, radicalism is unthinkable without cultural dissension. When the issue is to explain the predilection of students for radical changes, and not their mere involvement in politics, the argument according to which the gravity of the social problems dictates the option for radical ideology does not look convincing. It presupposes a type of determinism that amounts to saying that the more acute the social problems, the greater the need for revolutionary changes. Unfortunately, important exceptions challenge this kind of assertion. Though social systems burdened with acute social problems proliferate in the world, revolutions are rare occurrences. Take the case of Indian students:

although the university student population was the most turbulent in the world, the student radicals do not as a rule make the structures of the larger society and of the university objects of a general critique. Indian student radicals declare no fundamental criticism of their society; they have no schemes for the reconstruction of their universities. They do take stands on public issues. . . . The Indian student

agitation is “occasionalist”; it responds to particular stimuli, local, regional, or national, but grievances do not become generalized and are therefore not persistent.¹¹

Given that extreme levels of poverty, further rigidified by the caste system, plagued India, a social situation more conducive to arouse indignation could hardly be imagined, especially among people exposed to modern ideas. Nonetheless, the highly muddled condition only provoked turbulent protests that, however intense and repetitive they may have been, fell short of developing a systematic opposition to the social system, still less of embracing a reconstructive intent. In light of the strong conduciveness of the social conditions, what else could explain the lack of attraction of Indian students to radical ideologies but the resistance emanating from the cultural sphere? The point is that Indian students did not develop a sense of alienation from their culture and tradition. Accordingly, they protested for what needed to be fixed or reformed without, however, harboring a project of total change.

To sum up, cultural factors as much as social conditions are necessary to foster radicalism. Statements assigning radicalism exclusively to structural conditions reflect a deterministic view that excludes the input of different cultural dispositions. The overemphasis on structural conditions forgets that social conflicts usually involve competing elites with specific agendas and goals. According to Charles Tilly, more than the antagonism between the ruling elite and the masses, what creates a revolutionary situation is the conflict between aspiring elites with dissident convictions and interests and the established elite. Rejecting the primacy that theories of revolution, such as Marxism and the theory of relative deprivation, accord to social discontent, Tilly’s school of thought rightly emphasizes the impact of elite conflicts. He maintains that “conflict among governments and various organized groups contending for power must be placed at the center of attention to explain collective violence and revolutions.”¹²

As expressions of political conflicts, ideologies do not simply crop up from structural conditions; they are strategies by which particular interests and beliefs compete for hegemony. It is not that the situation requires radical solutions; rather, radical solutions are necessary to enthrone special elites. The essential virtue of the radical ideology that is supposed to emanate from structural conditions is not simply to resolve social problems; it is to empower elites that have grown culturally sectarian or unorthodox. Because of their eccentric goals and values, such contenders do not fit in the system, however altered or reformed it may be. Political rivalries involving heterodox elites generate the conditions of social revolutions. What defines the case of India is precisely the nonemergence of culturally marginalized elites. The Ethiopian situation, on the other hand, set forth a political conflict between a traditional aristocracy and an educated elite that, on top of show-

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