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# The Ethiopian Student Movement: A Rejoinder to Bahru Zewde's *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*

MESSAY KEBEDE, *University of Dayton, Ohio*

Bahru's book presents a historical account of the Ethiopian student movement from its inception to the crucial split into rival political parties shortly before the eruption of the revolution and the rise of the Derg. Though the account does not release new facts, it gives a detailed picture of the main events, circumstances, and actors that shaped the movement. The book narrates the important moments in chronological order and analyzes their contributions to the process of radicalization. One of Bahru's conspicuous suppositions is that radicalization should be seen "as a process rather than as a sudden development."<sup>1</sup> This supposition enables him to weigh the inputs of external and internal factors on the radicalization process.

The book is not content with a historical account of the movement; it also briefly criticizes other authors, Ethiopian as well as foreign, who have written on the same subject. While most of the works mentioned are criticized for historical inaccuracies and a lack of primary sources, my book on the same subject, *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960–1974*,<sup>2</sup> is singled out by virulent polemical attacks denouncing inaccuracies and shortage of primary sources. Even the entire work is rebuffed on

the ground that it is based on fallacious and malicious premises designed to discredit the student movement. Going beyond the characterization of my book as “dismissive,” Bahru removes my right—as a philosopher—to write on the issue because in his view the student movement “has to be viewed not as a philosophical issue but as a historical phenomenon.”<sup>3</sup> He also looks for support in reviews of my book that were critical, but ignores those, significantly more numerous, that applauded the book for its theoretical inputs and original approach. Interestingly, Bahru refers to Richard Reid’s review as one critical appraisal but fails to mention the highly positive assessments permeating the review. The proof is Reid’s conclusion, which reads as follows:

Overall, this is a thoughtful, provocative and insightful book, essential reading for anyone interested in Ethiopia during the revolutionary years of the 1960s and 1970s, and the era of political radicalisation in Africa and Asia more broadly. This is a book which grapples with such fundamental themes as elitism, modernity, education and development, intertwining them and offering new perspectives on how revolution, broadly defined, goes awry, despite best intentions.<sup>4</sup>

My intention is not to defend the right of philosophers to theorize on social movements and changes; nor is it to defend the value of my work against Bahru’s attacks. Rather, I want to show that his criticisms of my book are either contradictory or express an inability to analyze from a level surpassing mere narration. In thus exposing the theoretical poverty of Bahru’s book, as well as the inconsistency of his project of shielding the student movement from criticism, I will explicate how and why Bahru intentionally misreads my book. I add that what Bahru calls “dismissive” is actually my intent to show the tragic nature of the Ethiopian student movement. Doubtless, the students had the good intention of correcting glaring injustices and modernizing their country, but they did it in such a way that it blew up in their faces and they themselves became the first victims. As the saying goes, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” To expose this reversal—which Bahru occasionally recognizes in speaking of “tragic consequences”—is not dismissive.<sup>5</sup> What needs to be explained is why Bahru is dead set on criticizing me even when I agree with his own views.

Even as Bahru stigmatizes my book for being inimical to the student movement, his own dedication to the movement reads as follows: "To the Youth of Ethiopia who assumed a burden incommensurate with their intellectual resources and their country's political assets and paid dearly for it."<sup>6</sup> The dedication does no more than echo the customary view of the then emperor and ruling class ascribing the movement to infantile impetuosity. Moreover, if the students did not have the intellectual capacity to understand the situation of their country, let alone lead it, it is plain that Bahru describes the movement as a pretentious, quixotic venture. Bahru is so keen to show that the movement was inspired solely by youth generosity that he dismisses any attempt to assign other motives to the students. The students, Bahru says, "did what they did in all genuineness and sincerity. They had no hidden agenda."<sup>7</sup> This statement is surprising in view of the transformation of the movement into radical parties ferociously vying for the control of power. What is more, the active and massive participation of Eritrean and Tigrean students, many in leadership positions, had to do more with resentment of Amhara rule than with social altruism, as witnessed by their massive involvement in ethnonationalist and secessionist movements soon after the collapse of imperial rule. Is it not naïve to attribute these major developments to youth generosity only?

Bahru misses the point that assigning a hidden agenda to the movement is to take it seriously, for it is to maintain that weighty motives rather than passing impetuosity inspired the movement. But then his contradiction is glaringly obvious: though he denounces my "underestimation of the structural causes that led to its [the student movement's] rise," he himself derives the radicalization of students from the biological notion of youth.<sup>8</sup> When the whole issue is to understand what forces shaped the Ethiopian youth into a radical movement, Bahru proposes the biological features associated with a stage in human development as an explanatory concept. In so doing, he completely overlooks the elitist impact that Western education has on students in a largely traditional society, namely, the belief that they are entitled to social leadership on account of their exclusive enlightenment. He also becomes unable to show concretely how the structural features of the imperial regime impacted on the radicalization of students. Though he speaks of the causal influence of the structural conditions, the predominance assigned to the biological state of youth significantly dilutes the determining impact of the structural conditions to the point

of reducing them to the level of mere excuses. In thus turning structural causes into pretexts to oppose the regime, Bahru fails to show how the natural disposition of youth is shaped into a revolutionary consciousness. For instance, unlike Bahru, many authors have linked radicalization with such issues as the fear of unemployment, government repression, the absence of social mobility, ethnic animosity, and so forth.<sup>9</sup> Because Bahru dismisses motives other than youth altruism, he misses the fact that the issue is not youth, but the conditions that radicalized it.

The objection according to which the attribution of political ambition to the student movement is a view inspired by hindsight bias simply discounts the progress achieved by social sciences and philosophy in the comprehension of how hidden, unconscious motives exercise profound influence on human actions. In expressly rejecting the impact of hidden motives, Bahru takes us back to the time when everything was taken at face value, when youth was just generosity. Not only does Bahru support this naïve and uncritical approach, but he also makes it the mark of the superiority of his book over all others on the same subject. Indeed, after saying that the movement must not be “judged from the vantage point of the present,” he adds that “it has to be recorded first and foremost ‘the way it exactly happened,’ and not how it should have been.”<sup>10</sup>

Two major missteps occur here. (1) Bahru believes that his primary and secondary sources recorded everything without any bias or preconceived agenda. As such, they should be taken at face value and the work of the historian is to reproduce and include them in a sequentially ordered narrative. This utterly uncritical approach forgets that any attempt at an objective study of a social phenomenon rests on the distinction between real and apparent or seeming motives. (2) For Bahru, any assessment of the past from the present is mistaken, for it assigns motives that were in the past nonexistent. Yet the opposite is more likely, in that the disparity between declared motives and actual actions reveals the displacement of seeming motives by real motives. Actions speak louder than words, says common sense. Indeed, the true motive of a generation is revealed by what it does, and not by what it thinks about itself. The objectivity of a scholarly study depends on the effort it makes to unravel real motives rather than on how well it reproduces the illusions of the time.

Because Bahru is committed to a work merely reproducing what the Ethiopian youth said about itself, it is no wonder that his book does

not utilize an interdisciplinary approach. Besides an almost journalistic reporting on the history of student movements in a global context, the book totally ignores the rich and varied conceptual resources that other disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science, and others, offer for studying the motives, conditions, circumstances, and outcomes of youth and student movements. The characteristics of these studies is that they go beyond the work of echoing what students say about themselves in order to disclose underlying forces and motives.<sup>11</sup>

Among the scholars who have studied the Ethiopian student movement, the only one who receives leniency from Bahru is Randi Rønning Balsvik. He characterizes her book on the student movement as a “solid empirical work” and even suggests that his own intent is to build on that solid foundation.<sup>12</sup> Such a project would have been promising if indeed it had been followed through. Unfortunately, Bahru leaves out the theoretical insights of Balsvik’s study, reducing it to a mere gathering of empirical data. For instance, Balsvik notes that the “moderate forces were still strong among the students” so that radicalization must be attributed to the repressive stand taken by the imperial government.<sup>13</sup> One major implication of repression is that it promoted the few radical students to the leadership position by validating the need for a radical riposte to a government offering nothing but repression to even moderate demands.

Radicalization did not emerge from youth but from the political, cultural, and material conditions of life. Unlike Bahru, Balsvik defines Ethiopia’s modern education as “an alien institution,” with the consequence that one factor of radicalization is cultural uprootedness, inspiring the desire to demolish everything and rebuild the entire society anew.<sup>14</sup> To the extent that uprootedness leaves a void that cries for a substitute, Balsvik rightly conjectures that “for the majority of students belief in [Marxism] and commitment to socio-economic change can be said to have filled the void created by the erosion of their religious roots.”<sup>15</sup> The upshot of all this is that “ideology had become more important to the students than the survival of Ethiopia as a state.”<sup>16</sup> Clearly, radicalization does not spring from the youth factor only; it is also an outcome of the uprooting effect of modern education craving for a substitute belief. Unfortunately, Bahru pays no heed to these and other insights, which show that the issue of radicalization is far more complicated than the simple fact of youth generosity.

What is perplexing is that Bahru does not totally ignore the impact of the legacy of traditional culture. He thus mentions—once—the “anti-religious character of communism” but never raises the issue of knowing how the fundamentally religious character of Ethiopian culture had vanished and so Ethiopians easily became infatuated with a militant atheist doctrine.<sup>17</sup> Instead, he uses the religious issue to attack my work by saying, “contrary to Messay, I would tend to see in this canonical character of student radicalism not a negation of the past but its continuation.”<sup>18</sup> The surprise here is that I agree with Bahru, since I say that there was “a transmutation of the religious orthodoxy . . . into a Marxist orthodoxy.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, I write that “the rejection of traditional beliefs and values as a result of modern education brought about an ideological void, which in turn activated the longing for substitute beliefs.”<sup>20</sup> Precisely, to speak of “substitute”—a concept widely used throughout my book—is to suggest that the receiving culture did not undergo any renovation so that Marxism was absorbed with the traditional dogmatic mentality. The culture was in a longing state and, as such, devoid of any aptitude to critically appraise foreign influences or adapt them to Ethiopian realities. Accordingly, despite his attempt to denigrate the importance I give to the traditional culture, Bahru’s own appeal to the persistence of the traditional mentality makes my point, to wit, that neither structural causes, nor the global dominance of Marxist ideology in the 1960s, and still less youth idealism, are enough to explain radicalization. For radicalization to happen, the soil receiving these influences must be fertile, or as Bahru himself puts it, Marxism-Leninism became a dogma because “on the soil of Christian Orthodoxy were sown the seeds of Marxist orthodoxy.”<sup>21</sup>

Though Bahru criticizes my description of the student movement as a manufactured movement, he himself introduces a distinction between the movement and its radicalization, since he asserts that the radical core is “responsible for the injection into student debates of a degree of self-righteousness and dogmatism.”<sup>22</sup> What this means is that, without this radical core, the movement would have remained a moderate one. But then, is this not to admit that the movement, as it ended up being, was a manufactured movement? Furthermore, once the distinction between the radical few and the majority is established, it is incumbent on Bahru to explain why the radical core was able to assume the leadership of the movement and how the majority of students followed a direction opposed

to their initial intent. Unfortunately, Bahru does not even raise the problem, let alone provide an answer.

What Bahru misses when he denounces my “underestimation of the structural causes” and criticizes my approach to the movement as being manufactured is that my intent is not so much to explain a student rebellion, which was almost universal in the 1960s and early 1970s, as to elucidate an unusually radical mood. Such a degree of radicalization was indeed rare. I was in France as a student at the time and the only movement that showed a similar level of radicalization, apart from that of French students, was the Iranian student movement. Even African students were apprehensive of the extremist positions that Ethiopian students used to take. I note in my book Ali Mazrui’s characterization of Ethiopian students, after he gave a talk to university students in Ethiopia in 1973, as the “most radical African students [he] had seen.”<sup>23</sup> My argument does not underestimate the impact of structural causes, but simply argues that these causes by themselves are not enough to explain such a high degree of radicalization. Other factors, for instance cultural, must have intervened.

The attempt to explain radicalization by structural causes only—I say “attempt” because, as stated previously, for Bahru, youth generosity is the primary factor—logically assumes that there was no alternative to radicalization. Yet Bahru endorses the assumption for the purpose of concealing the derailment of the movement. That is why he is never clear on the question of an alternative. At times, he seems to suggest that radicalization was the only way out, a view that appears to emanate from a relapse into the dogma of Leninism. At other times, he seems to consider the idea of an alternative, when for instance he assigns great importance to the 1960 military coup against the imperial regime, as though to suggest that if the coup had succeeded, things would have been quite different. Also, Bahru states that many among the top officials of the regime were aware of the need for reforms, some even advising the emperor to move toward a constitutional monarchy with a prime minister heading the government. The noted readiness for reforms shows that there was another, reformist, alternative, one that did not materialize because it was opposed by the emperor, who understandably did not want to forsake his absolutism.

Let us go further: even students, according to Bahru, were committed to a reformist agenda. To quote him, “if there was one distinct orientation that most students had in the mid-1960s, it was clearly nationalist.”<sup>24</sup> Termed



Ethiopianism, the movement articulated an ideology opposing both the West and Communism. The fact that this ideology gave way to Marxism-Leninism requires an explanation that Bahru does not provide. In addition to showing the manufactured nature of the radicalization process, the availability of a reformist ideology turns radicalization into a complicated matter. It leads to the idea that factors other than mere structural causes must have intervened, for it was not necessary for students to become zealots of Leninism to denounce the imperial regime and propose a moderate course of change. What else does the existence of reformism among students confirm but that radicalization was a manufactured outcome? Yet, for Bahru, one cannot speak of a manufactured movement “unless one disputes the validity of the issues raised by the students.”<sup>25</sup> Again, one need not be a Leninist activist to denounce the regime: reformism was another, actually more natural, possibility.

Here Bahru delivers his ultimate thought, since he goes beyond scholarly criticism and accuses me of being nostalgic for the imperial time. Indeed, how else could one explain the real motive for my dismissive attitude? That I was a supporter of the regime is, according to Bahru, apparent, because “one searches in vain throughout Messay’s book for any substantial critique of a system that could not even tolerate the idea of a constitutional monarchy, let alone introduce any meaningful land reform or tolerate regional autonomy.”<sup>26</sup> The true reason why Bahru is so enraged about the book is now in the open: I denigrate the generous movement and sacrifices of students by giving them hidden and detrimental motives because I am nostalgic for the imperial regime.

There is no need here to show in lengthy detail how Bahru’s biased reading overlooks the numerous denunciations of the imperial regime dispersed throughout my book, not to mention a whole chapter—chapter 9—titled “Objective Causes of the Radicalization of Students and Intellectuals,” in which I depict the serious flaws of the imperial regime. It suffices to give one quotation describing broadly the sociopolitical environment in which student protests took place to refute Bahru’s reading of my book. I write:

Not only did the educational system become so dysfunctional that the number of university dropouts dramatically increased, but also the national economy’s sluggish growth could not absorb even university

graduates. Add to this major crisis the imperial regime's complete reluctance to enact reforms, and you will understand how progressively the majority of students came under the influence of the radicals, who wanted to destroy the system. As we shall see, neither the regime nor the university administration did anything to help moderates have some influence in the student movement. On the contrary, the way they handled protests and demands propelled the radicals to uncontested leadership of the movement.<sup>27</sup>

Granted all the social evils of the regime, there remains the question of why moderates lost the leadership to radical groups. In other words, the cause of the students was indeed legitimate, but it did not have to embrace a radical Marxist-Leninist ideology. Bahru is allergic to this way of formulating the problem because its theoretical content transcends narration, which, in his eyes, is the only appropriate approach to the issue at hand.

#### NOTES

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1. Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement, c. 1960–1974* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2014), 135.
2. Messay Kebede, *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960–1974* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2008).
3. Messay, *Radicalism*, 8–9.
4. Richard Reid, "Review of Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960–1974," *Reviews in History* (review no. 758), <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/758> (accessed 28 February 2014).
5. Bahru, *Quest*, 8.
6. Bahru, *Quest*, v.
7. Bahru, *Quest*, 280.
8. Bahru, *Quest*, 8.
9. The following are examples of books and articles (the list includes only those devoted to Ethiopian students) discussing the radicalizing impact of social conditions: Randi Rønning Balsvik, *Haile Sellassie's Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution, 1952–1977* (East Lansing: African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1985); Girma Amare, "Education and Society in Prerevolutionary Ethiopia," *Northeast African Studies* 6, nos. 1–2 (1984): 61–79; Asafa Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia: State*

- Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868–1992* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1993); Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation: The History of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party*, part 1 (Silver Spring, MD: The Independent Publishers, 1993); Tesfaye Demmellash, "On Marxism and Ethiopian Student Radicalism in North America," *Monthly Review* 35 (1984): 25–37; John Markakis and Nega Ayele, *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1986); Teshome G. Wagaw, *Education in Ethiopia: Prospect and Retrospect* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979).
10. Bahru, *Quest*, 9.
  11. The following list gives examples of such studies: Donald K. Emmerson, ed., *Students and Politics in Developing Nations* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968); Seymour Martin Lipset, ed., *Student Politics*, ed. Seymour Martin Lipset (New York: Basic Books, 1967); Lewis S. Feuer, *The Conflict of Generations: The Character and Significance of Student Movements* (New York: Basic Books, 1969); Philip G. Altbach and Robert S. Laufer, *The New Pilgrims: Youth Protest in Transition* (New York: David McKay Company, 1972); Anthony M. Orum, ed., *The Seeds of Politics: Youth and Politics in America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972); Mark N. Hagopian, *The Phenomenon of Revolution* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1974); James H. Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).
  12. Bahru, *Quest*.
  13. Balsvik, *Haile Sellassie's Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution*, 160.
  14. Balsvik, *Haile Sellassie's Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution* 9.
  15. Randi Rønning Balsvik, "Haile Selassie's Students: Rise of Social and Political Consciousness," PhD diss., University of Tromsø, Norway, 1979, 491.
  16. Balsvik, "Haile Selassie's Students: Rise of Social and Political Consciousness," 266.
  17. Bahru, *Quest*, 127.
  18. Bahru, *Quest*, 138.
  19. Bahru, *Quest*.
  20. Messay, *Radicalism*, 192.
  21. Bahru, *Quest*, 271.
  22. Bahru, *Quest*.

23. Messay, *Radicalism*, 8.
24. Bahru, *Quest*, 128.
25. Bahru, *Quest*, 152.
26. Bahru, *Quest*, 8.
27. Messay, *Radicalism*, 21.

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