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PERSPECTIVES ON THE ETHIOPIAN TRANSFORMATION: VARIATIONS ON COMMON THEMES

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After fifteen years the Ethiopian transformation remains profoundly controversial. From the beginning, the participants have warred with each other over basic revolutionary objectives. These struggles have produced little convergence of revolutionary design from the tempering of aspirations on the anvil of realities. Rather, the dynamics of these struggles have etched the most enduring of the now emergent long term contours of the Ethiopian transformation.

This prolonged strife has touched on some of the most profound issues of political life: the nature of the state, nationhood, socioeconomic class, processes of development, the significance of ideological vision, and the nature of revolutionary change. Until very recently Ethiopian political experience has been of strikingly peripheral influence in theoretical explorations of these issues, even as students of Ethiopia have only infrequently attempted to relate their studies to the major hypothesis produced by such theory. It follows that a deeper understanding of the Ethiopian transformation and its antecedents may stimulate new approaches to these familiar theoretical issues.

The nearly simultaneous recent appearance of several new books on the Ethiopian transformation makes possible a preliminary assessment not only of the transformation itself, its causes, course and prospects, but also of its theoretical significance.¹ The purpose of this paper is to begin that appraisal. The hypothesis of the paper is that while these works naturally differ in their emphases and in the aspects of the transformation that they most illuminate, they present broadly similar appraisals of many critical "facts": the nature of the *ancien regime*, the causes and course of the Ethiopian transformation itself, and its outcomes for the peoples involved. However, explicitly or implicitly, the new studies of the Ethiopian transformation differ markedly from each other in the theoretical frameworks they adopt. Largely for that reason, they differ in their understanding of the transformation's theoretical significance.

The major task of this paper is to begin to assess these contrasting theoretical premises as they bear upon the identification and interpretation of central issues concerning the nature of the *ancien regime*, the

causes of the transformation, its phases and course, and its outcomes.² The author will attempt to overcome as much as possible the obvious difficulties presented by the fact that his own book is one of those involved. The paper begins with a brief presentation of the theoretical perspectives of four recent works and then proceeds to examine the bearing of these theoretical perspectives on the causes, course, and consequences of the Ethiopian transformation.³

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON REVOLUTION

At the risk of oversimplification and distortion one may hypothesize that the new studies of the Ethiopian transformation proceed from four distinct theoretical perspectives: political institutional, constitutional, structuralist, and class. Christopher Clapham's *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* centers on revolutionary dissolution and reconstruction of institutional order. For a revolution to occur, Clapham argues, two essential conditions must be present. "First, a set of circumstances must be present which prompt the collapse of the existing institutional order, and which amount to a 'revolutionary situation'. Secondly, measures must be implemented to construct a new institutional order."⁴ He recognizes class, economic structure and international connections as important but not as "necessary causal factors" in the explanation of revolutions. Analysis of such factors, he claims, does not enable one to distinguish revolutionary events from nonrevolutionary events, while, when one centers on political institutional factors, "the similarities between revolutionary states leap to the attention."⁵

In *The Ethiopian Transformation: The Quest for Post-Imperial State*, my contention is that while the nature and transformation of the state has been the focal point in Ethiopia since 1974, the scope of the controversy between the principal actors has extended well beyond the reconstruction of political institutions per se. The issue has been the very nature of the Ethiopian polity itself, whether and in what form it should continue to exist, and how its reconstitution should be conceived and implemented. I think the enduring contentiousness of the Ethiopian transformation has at root centered on the state conceived not simple as institutional structure but, with Rothchild, as "a set of organizing principles."⁶ Such organizing principles, whether formally codified or left unwritten, include not merely the design of governmental structures themselves but the relationship of those structures to the larger society.

Edmond Keller's *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People's Republic* adopts a structural perspective that centers on "the objective relationships

that exist between the state and social classes and the state and other states.”⁷ He conceives revolution not as an event but as a process in the reordering of “fundamental values, relationships, and the social myths upon which society is based.”⁸ His study centers particularly on the nature and extent of state autonomy, with respect both to domestic social forces and to international influences as a critical variable in revolutionary analysis. In this his analysis is akin to that of Skocpol’s *States and Social Revolutions* which identifies state autonomy as a critically distinguishing mark of the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions.⁹

Finally, John Markakis’ *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, as is evident from its title, stands apart from the other studies in expanding its scope to include Somalia and Sudan as well as Ethiopia. From this perspective he contends that “although not identical to its immediate neighbors, the Ethiopian regime has more in common with the radical military regimes in the Sudan and Somalia than it has with the French or Russian revolutionaries.”¹⁰ He is critical of political analysis centered on the autonomy of the state, “the massive superstructure of the state, especially its bureaucratic and military sinews that are nourished by its foreign patrons.”¹¹ The theoretical failing of such analysis, he contends, is that “Such notions detach the state from its social moorings and put it beyond the scope of analysis. The roots of power of the post-colonial state rest in the material base of its own society, precisely in the modern sector of the economy which the state either owns or manages, or controls so tightly that it becomes the dominant factor in the process of production and distribution of material and social resources.”¹² Central to his thesis is the observation that “Marxism tends to disregard the material dimensions of persisting communal differences elsewhere in the world (than Western Europe)” and that “cultural elements are often used as rallying symbols to mobilize support in conflicts that have a material basis; to focus exclusively on these (cultural elements) is to miss the substance of the issues at stake.”¹³

THE NATURE OF THE ANCIEN REGIME

There appears to be a consensus on many of the strengths and weaknesses of the *ancien regime* and on its achievements and ultimate failings. These points of consensus are as follows. Haile Selassie and his predecessors labored with some success to centralize imperial authority at the expense of the great regionally powerful lords of the realm. The emperors succeeded in restoring and preserving the integrity of the Ethiopian state in the face of severe international challenges and of the enormous expansion of the empire itself under Menilik II. The analyses appear to share recognition that while pre- 1974 could be characterized as “feudal” in some respects, Ethiopian

“feudalism” exhibited important features distinguishing it from the classical European varieties. It is broadly agreed that Haile Selassie was extremely skillful in maintaining and consolidating his own power by playing potential challengers off against one another, that he made significant efforts to recast (at least in form) the institutions of imperial government following his restoration to power after World War II, that he successfully staved off diplomacy was of considerable importance in sustaining his rule domestically, and that he made significant if limited efforts to stimulate a measure of economic development during the postwar years of his reign.

At the same time the studies appear to concur that the capacity of his regime to transform life at the grassroots was sharply circumscribed as evidenced by revolts against imperial policies in Gojjam, that the significance of imperial economic modernization efforts was limited, and that such modernization, if anything, intensified and added new dimensions to historic inequalities. The studies appear to agree that the political restructuring of Haile Selassie’s government to take on the appearance of embryonic constitutional monarchy was more symbolic than real.

While agreeing broadly with the foregoing with respect to the performance of the imperial regimes of Haile Selassie and his predecessors, there may be a subtle but significant difference in how the authors understand the defining, essential characteristics of the Ethiopian state in imperial times. Clapham’s emphasis is upon the increasingly centralized political and military power headed by an emperor controlling a bureaucratic establishment “whose members had no independent base of their own,” sustained by an increasingly centrally controlled army. In his earlier work, Clapham emphasized the dependence of the functionaries of this bureaucratic structure upon the personal rule of the Emperor late into his reign.¹⁴ This establishment, in his view sustained and was sustained by an emergent “system of centralized commercial agriculture, by-passing the subsistence economy of the highlands.” This system, he recognized, engendered an “explosive combination of economic exploitation with ethnic differentiation.”¹⁵ Clapham emphasized that the structure of the state was “decisively altered” beginning with Tewodros’ reign due to the substitution of control of force for descent as the determining force in imperial succession, the centralization of power, and expanding external relations. He does not appear to suggest, however, that the transformed state ceased to be sustained by a distinctive set of values, myths, and attitude not the least of which was a “general belief in hierarchy.”¹⁶ He contends that this culture laid claim to being “national” rather than limited to the Amhara people. This “core identity, associated with one people” was plastic enough to permit the assimilation of other peoples, though not completely enough to eliminate the “national question” that has continued to plague political life in the country.¹⁷

Keller's perspective on the historical development of this bureaucratic empire is informed by Eisenstadt's work.¹⁸ Keller sees the emperors as having been "necessarily engaged in a perpetual juggling act in which [they] attempted to balance the state's survivalist needs against demand emanating from multiple competing traditional and modern social classes."¹⁹ "His emphasis is on the creative imperial adaptation to these circumstances through state-centric economic development measures, constitutional and institutional change to improve his standing among and coopt more the educated classes, and the cultivation of external political, military, and economic support. In this way, he suggests emergent capitalism fed upon residual feudalism but at the cost of deepening social contradictions preparing the way for the social revolution to follow."²⁰ In contrast to Clapham, Keller appears to assign less importance to traditional culture as a foundation for the imperial state, to treat the bureaucratic empire as more precariously sustained by underlying class formations, and to emphasize more the growing vulnerability of the imperial order to widening and intensifying class contradictions.

Markakis centers on what he considers to be the "irreversible" socioeconomic peripheralization of pastoralists and subsistence cultivators as the obverse of the imperial state's success in transforming property relations to establish a landholding class "beholden to" the state.²¹ However, he appears to conceive ethnic identity as having been the basis for solidifying such class formation—"it was easier for a non-Christian, who also did not speak Amharigna, to pass through the eye of a needle than to enter the charmed circle of power and privilege—and class alliance with the state."²² In his seminal earlier work Markakis argues that emperor Haile Selassie accomplished this result by melding traditional and modern roles.

The overwhelming tendency of the system is to dissolve specialized modern roles into the vague, all-encompassing role of administrator; to transform all educated persons into functionaries; and to subordinate all roles to the primacy of the political one. The result of this tendency has been to blur the distinction between modern and traditional roles within the administrative establishment of the state, to maintain the primacy of traditional criteria, and to force the educated to meet such criteria in order to gain advancement beyond a certain level.²³

Thus, Markakis appears to go beyond Clapham in emphasizing cultural criteria as the glue cementing the imperial state and the relationship between the state and classes beholden to it. He appears to place somewhat greater emphasis on such traditional cultural factors than does Keller. Although Keller appears to draw upon Markakis's work in pointing to imperial cooptation of "modernizing" classes, he also appears to suggest that in the later stages of Haile Selassie's regime class contradictions increasingly became too

pronounced to be blurred by imperial cooptation. Markakis appears to speak more of the peripheralization of exploited classes and their embryonic regrouping under ethnic, even national, banners of their own, than of naked class contradictions to which Keller's work appears to point. Clapham recognizes the "explosive combination of economic exploitation and ethnic differentiation" to which the consolidation of the twentieth century imperial state gave rise but appears to give less attention to the expression of such exploitation as class or national consciousness.²⁴

In my own review of Ethiopian history, I have been inclined to pursue in the twentieth century the question that Rubenson addressed in the nineteenth: what has enabled the Ethiopian state to survive in periods when the institutions of central imperial government have been visibly weakened?²⁵ From the onset of Menelik's terminal illness early in the century to the enthronement of Haile Selassie as emperor there occurred a quarter-century of weakened imperial rule, prolonged and complex struggles for power among competing elites, and potential exploitation of these circumstances by European states in the course of their own imperial adventures. Such instability followed within the memory of many of the participants the imperial conquests of Menelik. Then there followed the Italian invasion and the subsequent restoration of Haile Selassie to his throne by the British who were tempted to seek to incorporate Ethiopia within their colonial orbit.²⁶

I am inclined to the hypothesis that the failure of centrifugal forces to challenge seriously and effectively the territorial integrity of Ethiopia during these times reflected an acceptance among elites of a sense of Ethiopian statehood over and above embryonic class consciousness, assimilation to Amhara culture, and organizational loyalty. While acceptance of hierarchy may have been part of this consciousness of political community, at least among elites, my hypothesis is that such consciousness of Ethiopian statehood also included the assumption of a *de facto* limited central government impact at the grass roots and, therefore, a measure of *de facto* administrative decentralization. In this analysis I suspect that my views may be somewhat closer to those of Markakis and perhaps Clapham than to Keller.

These subtle differences may indeed make a difference. For, in examining the causes of the fall of Haile Selassie's government and the movement for revolutionary change, it is important to be clear about what foundations of political community, if any survive, on the basis of which a would-be revolutionary regime might seek to transform the state and effect social revolution. The identification of such foundations is necessary *inter alia* if one is to show cause why, as the Eritreans and perhaps the Tigreans now claim, when an imperial regime falls the empire should not be dissolved into component national states as were European empires in Africa.

THE ORIGINS OF REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE

The new studies of the Ethiopian transformation appear to agree that the emperor's regime was ultimately fatally weakened by his own advancing age, the loss of military support from the United States, the effects of the character of his regime itself in limiting and inhibiting economic development efforts, and the increasingly costly struggle to force Eritrea to accept participation in a United Ethiopian state. But the studies appear to differ in subtle, possibly significant, ways.

Clapham, building on his earlier work, contends that the imperial order was essentially a "household system of government" in which "the emphasis on personal leadership in Ethiopian culture was brought to its peak."²⁷ This system was "eminently adapted to manipulating individuals, once these could be identified" but it was "entirely incapable of dealing with any social movement or grouping which went beyond the scale of a small court faction." In attempting to deal with such movements as though they were court factions, Clapham argues that "the regime cut itself off from a wider and ultimately much more important set of political constituencies which were developing in the country at large."²⁸ The regime, he argues, was thus made vulnerable by increasingly alienated constituencies it could not control, including those in the countryside, because imperial centralization had occurred at the expense of a regional nobility capable of acting as intermediaries between crown and countryside.

Keller appears to place less emphasis than Clapham upon the structural incapacities of imperial household government and more upon deficient, shortsighted, and ineffectual leadership by the emperor himself. At the same time he appears to give credence to the strength and capacity of emerging social and economic classes to resist imperial leadership as much or more than to the structural weaknesses of the imperial government itself. In particular, Keller observes "the low priority (the emperor) assigned to national political integration."²⁹ He considers the integrative effect of Oromo assimilation within the courts negligible, and in the country at large as doomed, because it presumed the assimilated groups had second class citizenship. This orientation was particularly apparent with respect to Eritrea, the Ogaden, and among the Oromo.

But Keller also recognizes that the Emperor's initiatives to "secularize and strengthen his own personal authority through proposed local government reform, infrastructural development, and broaden social service provisions" were ineffectual because the dominant classes were not interested in national political integration. Such classes, he argues, used both new and traditional political arenas to stymie such initiatives. Traditional landed

classes obstructed imperial development efforts in Chilalo, while those more inclined to “modernization” were favored by grants of land and other imperial favors that may have helped the emperor counterbalance traditional elites but did not favor national integration. Nevertheless, Keller contends that the emperor’s initiatives were shortsighted because they were conceived in terms of exploitation of existing regional inequalities “instead of defining ‘development’ in terms of improving living standards and life chances of people in peripheral areas.”³⁰ Though such class antagonisms were increasingly evident in the later years of Haile Selassie’s regime, Keller argues that nationalism continued to overlay and blunt them without being of sufficient strength itself to challenge the regime.³¹ He cites the corrosive effects of inflation and food shortages in radicalizing urban labor and white collar groups notwithstanding their own internal divisions and organizational weakness.

Markakis, in many ways joined by Keller, emphasizes the importance of an emergent intelligentsia alienated by exclusion from real power within the imperial system, frustrated by the effects of inflation upon living circumstances, and angered by the visible manifestations of inequality and exploitation attributable to the nature of the regime and its policies. Both appear to emphasize the failure of imperial leadership and the emergence of alternative leadership cadres and catalytic factors making visible the structural weaknesses of the imperial order and portending its downfall. In his earlier work, published on the eve of the beginning of the revolution, Markakis appeared to anticipate that such alternative, more “modernizing” elites would eventually cease to be cooptable by the emperor and supplant his regime with one more attuned to their interests.³²

My own perspective, formed with the benefit of hindsight, is that the emperor ultimately undermined his own regime and perhaps the fabric of the Ethiopian state itself by weakening the position of such “modernizing” elites as well as those of more traditional orientation through his cooptation of them. Throughout such cooptation processes of economic development and class formation proceeded without benefit of legitimized leadership. Exploited peasants and urban labor groups lacked real leadership to articulate their grievances even as middle classes lacked leaders to express the ways in which their interests conflicted with those of the imperial regime and more traditional classes.

In my view the Emperor further damaged the fabric of the Ethiopian state itself by the manner in which he cashiered the Eritrean federation. Eritreans as a people were not won over to closer union with Ethiopia simply by the cooptation of her elected elites. The resulting war was to intensify their alienation to a point where alternatives short of secession appeared no longer to lie within the realm of possibility.

Thus, broadly speaking, my analysis generally coincides with that of

Clapham on the infirmities of the imperial order while I tend to differ from Markakis and I believe Keller as well on the strength of alternative elites' challenges to the emperor's regime. However, I am perhaps closer to Markakis than to Clapham and Keller in thinking that the emperor's policies preserved his personal rule in the medium term at the long run expense of the underlying foundations of the Ethiopian polity upon which a successor regime would be obliged to build.

These differences of emphasis have an important bearing upon an analysis of the change occurring in the wake of the fall of Haile Selassie's government. They bear particularly on the question of revolutionary leadership, and on the question of who was in position to exert such leadership from what power bases. The issue of whether Haile Selassie's government undermined only his own regime or the bases of an Ethiopian polity upon which *any* successor regime might build is likewise of critical importance. Both issues are important to an understanding of the conflict that bedeviled those who shared a determination to bring down Haile Selassie's government but were to discover that they could agree on little else.

THE COURSE OF THE TRANSFORMATION

A. Points of Consensus. The recent studies of the Ethiopian transformation are broadly in agreement on much of what has transpired in the course of the Ethiopian transformation, including the definition of its major phases: (1) from the resignation of the Aklilu cabinet in February, 1974 to the assassination of General Aman and the arrested notables of the old regime the following November; (2) from the proclamation of Ethiopian socialism in December 1974 to 1978, which included the major reform initiatives, the bitter strife between the military and its urban challengers, and the Ogaden war; and (3) from about 1979 to the present, including the formation of the Workers Party, the formal constituting of the People's Democratic Republic, and intense efforts to promote further collectivization and development by forced marches. The "facts" upon which each of the recent studies appear to agree within each of these phases include the following.

1. Famine, inflation, a new education policy and a gasoline price increase without compensatory increases in publicly regulated taxi and bus fares were among the proximate causes of the beginning of the fall of Haile Selassie's government. The beginning of the end of his government began with the resignation of the Aklilu cabinet in February, 1974. The ensuing waves of strikes and demonstrations represented a genuinely popular revolutionary uprising in which lower ranking military men themselves were in a sense participants. The Endalkachew Cabinet undertook on its own through attempted manipulation of army units to shore up the emperor's regime. But

the unceasing waves of strikes and demonstrations demonstrated the new government's hopelessness, creating a power vacuum into which the military felt obliged to step. Initially, it did so in a collegial, even democratic fashion, and it conducted its insurgency leading to the eventual overthrow of the emperor in a peaceful, cautious, even gentlemanly fashion. In the 'Ethiopian Tikem' pronouncement, the military demonstrated its commitment to preserving national unity as well as to reform. Urban demands, centered especially within the Confederation of Ethiopian Labor Unions, for an immediate transition to civilian government buffeted the military regime from the moment it deposed the emperor. The military's resistance to these demands sparked four years of bitter strife, much of which pitted Meison, the party which pragmatically collaborated with the military until about 1977, against the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party. The military considered the leadership of the protesting constituencies to have been compromised by their roles under the old regime. Eritrean-born General Aman, the successor head of state, demonstrated at least the vague possibility of a negotiated settlement to the Eritrean war. This plus his disinclination to settle for a merely symbolic leadership role and his insistence on trials for the arrested notables of the *ancien regime* led to his assassination and the execution of about sixty of these prisoners in November. This event, even more clearly than the removal of the Emperor, established the transformation's point of no return. Any possibility for a negotiated settlement in Eritrea appeared to vanish at the same time for at least several years.

2. The military's first socialism proclamation in December 1974 was more akin to African socialism than to the scientific socialism it was later to espouse. The military committee, the *derg*, first nationalized all major commercial and industrial firms under a policy that left some room for small scale private enterprise. The *derg* then delivered on one of its most important commitments: a rural land reform that nationalized all rural land, abolished tenancy and most agricultural labor, set limits on the size of household holdings, vested administration of the reform in myriad peasant associations, and mandated the formation of cooperatives. The peasant associations were initially vested with a considerable array of functions and local initiative, but they were subsequently increasingly subjected to central control and direction through a hierarchy of district and provincial associations to the apex All-Ethiopian Peasant Association. Urban land reform, along broadly similar lines, was initiated a few months later. Students, previously skeptical of the *derg* were won over to it by these measures and accepted *zemetcha* assignments that included land reform implementation. They were also instrumental in effecting the regime's nationwide literacy campaign which increased the literacy rate from around 10 percent to at least 50 percent. The *zemetcha* campaigners were alienated by their reception in some areas and the refusal

of the *derg* to support them in their conflict with temporarily held over old regime administrators. Many joined the EPRP along with dissident labor, civil servant and other predominantly urban groups.

The urban strife between the *derg* and its adversaries, some of it centered on control of neighborhood organizations created by the urban land reform, persisted into 1978 even as the *derg* mobilized to fight an intensified war in Eritrea that was to spread to Tigre as well. The issues in these struggles, negotiations versus no negotiations and accommodation of urban insurgents or none, permeated the *derg* itself leading to a series of "palace" coups. These coups completed the metamorphosis of the *derg* from a large committee to a largely unchallenged dictatorship by Mengistu Haile Mariam. These struggles rendered meaningless in practice the 1976 proclamation of the National Democratic Revolutionary Program which appeared to contemplate recognition of regional autonomy and the formation of progressive political parties leading to the formation of a workers party.

The Ogaden War helped the *derg* to heal these divisions to some extent, but its real significance was in completing Ethiopia's and Somalia's exchange of great power military patrons. The United States interest in Ethiopia as a military partner declined even before 1974 as a consequence of its new diplomatic initiatives in the Arab world and with the increasing obsolescence of the Kagnew base. Its estrangement proceeded apace after the execution of Aman. Ethiopia's new alliance with the Soviets came only after its estrangement from the United States and well after its commitment to socialism was evident.

3. The *derg* tightened its administrative grip on the country in the course of its urban, Ogaden, and Eritrean wars. It decreed the eligibility of virtually all adult Ethiopians for military service. It decreed heavy penalties for failure to comply with its development policies. With the first two wars essentially won and significant progress made in the third, the *derg* set out to further the political and socioeconomic transformation. It pressed for further rural collectivization, villagization, massive resettlement, and more state farms. It inaugurated what almost all analysts considered to be an excessively ambitious ten years development program which it subsequently modified. To sustain its development efforts it continued to rely heavily on western trade, although trade with the Soviet bloc had increased. With the dawning of the Gorbachev era, Ethiopia has been under increasing pressure to moderate its development policies and cultivate increased western assistance. For development assistance multilateral agencies have remained important, though negotiations with the World Bank for a new term of agricultural development assistance stood at an impasse until 1988. In overcoming recurrent famines, notably in 1984-5, Ethiopia has continued to be largely dependent on western relief especially from the United States.

The *derg* launched a new and successful effort to establish a Workers' party along Leninist lines and it oversaw the formulation and popular ratification of a constitution embodying its conception of a people's democratic republic. It formally handed over power to a Workers' Party government in 1987, although, especially at senior levels, military personnel remained evident. These structures in fact established Mengistu Haile Mariam's virtually unchallenged power.³³ As his power has increased, favorable official references to Ethiopia's later emperors (other than Haile Selassie) have been noticeable.

B. Points at Issue. Despite our broad agreement on the essentials of the course and shape of the Ethiopian transformation since 1974, there appear to be some differences of interpretation among us reflected to some extent in our differences of emphasis and derived from our somewhat varying theoretical perspectives. These differences center on issues concerning (1) the dynamics of the interwoven processes of state reconstruction and social revolution, including the question of who was in position to exercise power upon what basis and (2) the defining features of the post-imperial Ethiopian state.³⁴

1. Clapham contrasts the leadership of Meison and EPRP in terms of their origins, leadership, ethnic balance, goals and tactics—the most significant of which were their differing relationships with the *derg*. At the core of the antagonism, he contends, was the issue of military rule with which Meison made a pragmatic peace and to which EPRP was violently opposed. Seemingly consistent with his institutional focus, Clapham's account of post-independence leadership struggles centers upon divergent institutional characteristics and institutional alignment—specifically with the military regime.

The other studies of the Ethiopian transformation share this characterization of the conflict as far as it goes but find it incomplete in somewhat contrasting ways. Markakis' emphasis on the dialectic between class and nation addresses the difficulties which EPRP as well as the *derg* and Meison experienced in effecting syntheses of these perspectives, illustrated in particular by tension between the EPRP and the Tigrean People's Liberation Front. He tends to treat ideology as a reflection of such underlying class and national forces, e.g., as "the handmaiden of embattled nationalism."³⁵ Thus for Markakis the institutional conflict between EPRP and the *derg* and Meison was absorbed in larger questions of class ethnicity that weakened both sides. Keller, while not necessarily disagreeing with either Markakis or Clapham gives particular attention to the ideological dimension, in his terms the struggle to establish a new sovereign social myth. He finds a significant difference in the contending parties' orientations toward a participatory socialist order, EPRP being more favorably disposed toward it than Meison. Clapham tends to reduce such ideological differences to underlying organizational

requirements suggesting that EPRP was more populist primarily because it was out of power.

While not discounting Clapham's perspective, I tend to share Keller's theoretical orientation that the clash of ideas over the design of the post-imperial state was just as important in the case of EPRP and Meison as it has been between the separatist organizations and the *derg*. Ideological commitments and organizational requirements have a reciprocal influence upon each other. Organizations are mobilized in support of ideological commitments even as such ideological orientations may also at times be colored by organizational necessities. In this particular case, behind the antagonism over the issue of military rule between EPRP, on the one hand, and Meison and the *derg*, on the other hand, lay a fundamental disagreement over the nature of the revolutionary process itself.

There were two aspects to that fundamental disagreement over the nature of the revolutionary process. First, the two parties differed over the priority in that process of state reconstruction and socioeconomic reform. EPRP's adherents insisted from the beginning that state reconstruction must precede socioeconomic reform; the *derg* and Meison took the opposite position. In part this issue centered not just upon the fact of military rule but upon the legitimacy, as well as the possibility, of "transitional" military rule, both of which EPRP appeared adamantly to deny. Second, this argument was based in part also upon revolutionary leadership credentials established within the context of the Emperor's government and the process of its demise between February and September 1974. Had the cooptation of elites under the Emperor compromised their eligibility to lead a successor revolutionary regime? The *derg* made clear its view that civilian elites had been so compromised. The civilians partly questioned the military's credentials on the same grounds but more generally saw the participation of these groups in the overthrow of Haile Selassie's government as establishing their credentials quite adequately. In this respect Haile Selassie's government laid the groundwork for a struggle over regime succession that greatly weakened the fabric of the Ethiopian state itself.

2. Our contrasting theoretical perspectives on the nature of the state itself would appear to influence our subtle, but I think, significant differences over the nature of the post-imperial Ethiopian state as it has evolved. These differences appear to center on the composition and capacities of the post-imperial state. With respect to composition, we are in agreement that at its apex Mengistu's rule has remained largely unchallenged, at least as this paper is being written. We likewise concur on the significant presence of military officers in the upper reaches of the state reflecting a continuity between the PMAC and the PDR and between COPWE and the WPE. But I think we may differ on the question of the extent to which the state is defined in part by

the foundations upon which it rests. In this regard, Clapham centers on the balance of military and civilian cadres within the framework of state structures, including the party. To some extent he stresses Mengistu's activity in balancing such factions and structures to retain power. While not disagreeing with the analysis, I think that party and formal state structure have been in reality built upon the foundations of the military establishment that has been greatly expanded and politicized in the course of its struggles with urban, regional, and international foes. While not discounting the effectiveness of state and party structures per se I tend to think that their effectiveness has been substantially the result of the power of the military establishment rather than independent of it. While they devote less attention to this issue in their books than I do in mine, I see evidence that Keller and Markakis tend to share my perspective.³⁶

With respect to capacities, Keller and Clapham appear to represent opposite viewpoints because of their contrasting definitions of the state. Clapham is impressed by the efficiency of the state in effecting administrative control, e.g. in the villagization process. On the other hand, he recognizes that efficiency in administrative control has proven antithetical to the promotion of agricultural development, and it has been unable to overcome persistent separatist insurgencies in Eritrea and Tigre. Clapham thus tends to convey the impression of a strong state because developmental and regional integration capacities appear not to be central to his definition of the state. Keller, on the other hand, conceives of Ethiopia as a "soft" rather than a "hard" state because, following Myrdal, such capacities are part of the definition of the state.³⁷ Markakis appears to agree, for he is critical of the concept of state autonomy because "it abstracts the state from underlying cultural and socio-economic forces."³⁸

I think this issue is most usefully addressed by distinguishing between the state, on the one hand, and government or regime on the other hand. In this perspective Ethiopia may be said to exhibit a "hard" regime within the framework of a "soft" state. As explained earlier, if "state" is conceived as a set of organizing principles, those principles may properly include not only the design of government but the relationships between government and society. The regime's persistent wars with secessionist groups suggest the absence of any working consensus on the design of the post-imperial state and thus its weakness. The struggles between the *derg* and its urban adversaries between 1974 and 1977 over the process of state transformation and social revolution became in effect differences over the structure of the state itself as the *derg* became increasingly "permanent" in the process of overcoming its adversaries. It does not necessarily reflect a strengthening of the post-imperial state that these differences were arbitrated by civil war, particularly when there is little evidence that the *derg's* adversaries have been reconciled to the order

through the structural innovations of the WPE and the PDR. Finally, the government's inability to engage rural households in robust processes of economic development within the framework of reforms the regime itself engineered may, following Hyden, indicate a grassroots alienation that weakens the state.³⁹ Conceiving the state in this fashion leads to the hypothesis that the fabric of the historic Ethiopian state itself has been substantially weakened by post-imperial wars, the foundations of which were in significant measure laid down by the *ancien regime* itself. But the initial willingness of rural households to accept state sponsored land reform in the name of socialism suggest more pragmatic pre-capitalist responses to the state than Hyden initially envisaged.

THE OUTCOMES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TRANSFORMATION

The authors of the four recent works are in broad agreement that the Ethiopian transformation has permanently liquidated the socioeconomic structure of the old regime even if the new one has shown some disposition to seek its own legitimization by reference to selected imperial antecedents. We are agreed that the transformation has produced socioeconomic reforms of great importance even as we are in agreement that they have been overextended and improperly managed. We concede the regime's achievement in vastly extending literacy even as we deplore the country's continued status as the world's poorest country. The failure of the *derg* not only to overcome earlier centrifugal tendencies in the form of Eritrean secessionism but to prevent the expansion of such tendencies is apparent to everyone. We recognize that the Mengistu government has successfully asserted far greater control over the peoples of the country than the regimes of the emperors even attempted, even as it is apparent to all of us that such increased control has not liberated economic energies of the Ethiopian people.

We differ on whether or not these outcomes amount to a revolution. Clapham thinks it undeniable that a revolution has occurred because for him a revolution is "a fundamental and irreversible change in the organization of a society." For Clapham a revolution has occurred when the "collapse of the existing institutional order" is followed by the "construct(ion) of a new institutional order."⁴⁰ He, thus, follows Skocpol in centering the central importance of "state autonomy" in effecting successful social revolutions." Keller, notwithstanding his concern with class formation and social myth and also his reliance on Myrdal's definition of the state, also appears to follow Skocpol's perspective and declare a revolution to have occurred. Markakis applied the term "revolution" to the Eritrean cause but rarely, if at all, to Ethiopia. He appears to stop short of classifying the Ethiopian transformation as a

revolution, at least in part because he seems troubled by the idea of “state autonomy,” the *derg*’s “garrison socialism” in his terms.

From my perspective, what constitutes a revolution must take account of what the participants establish as its parameters. In this case, it has been evident to me that all parties to the Ethiopian transformation have set those parameters to include significant socioeconomic reform and improved government-society relations as well as the reconstruction of institutional order. Thus, I differ with Skocpol’s conception of a social revolution, a conception which is also somewhat complicated by being bound up with the idea of a “successful” revolution. It is evident to me that the Mengistu government’s efforts to detach itself from the social forces that precipitated the demise of Haile Selassie’s government have produced little strengthening of government-society relations. An unresponsive peasantry, alienated urban groups, and defiant regional secessionist movements are indicative of weakened government-society relations. As a consequence of such frayed government-society relations, many of the objectives of the social revolution have not been realized. From my perspective the possibility of revolution has been evident in the design of a people’s democratic republic and in the promulgation of significant socioeconomic reforms. The largely symbolic realization of the former and the very limited success in implementing the latter point, thus, to at best only a partial or incomplete revolution. It is for that reason that I have preferred the “transformation” to “revolution” because the former does not presume that only positive, substantive change has occurred. “Transformation” may imply substantial positive change or it may connote rearrangement of the terms of an equation (political and socioeconomic equations in this instance) without a change of meaning.

PROSPECTS

Wisely enough, none of the new books risk any specific crystal ball gazing about the future of the transformation. Implicitly, however, I believe that they support a common set of general prognostications concerning Ethiopia’s future. All commentators appear to agree that the chance of returning to the status quo before 1974 are zero. We appear to share the belief, with Markakis’ possible exception, that the governmental structure that the *derg* built is unlikely to collapse even if conceivably a leadership change might take place. Clapham contends that its authoritarian, hierarchical nature is compatible with the Amhara centered political culture that nurtured and was sustained by the regimes of the emperors. My assessment of the organizing principles of the pre-1974 Ethiopian state departs somewhat from that of Clapham; i.e., that the structures established by Mengistu’s regime *may* be resilient enough to permit some of the modifications in development policy

and development management that are required to stimulate more favorable grassroots economic performance. If that were to occur, a successful revolution might still be in prospect. On this point I do not know if others agree.

None of us, however, appears to be prepared to predict the ultimate outcome of the Mengistu government's wars with Tigrean and Eritrean liberation movements, and events since all our books have appeared have underscored the seriousness of the challenge to the regime these insurgencies pose. The costs of these wars in human and material terms have been horrendous. The Ethiopian government continues to be unable to effect a military solution and yet has given scant indication of any willingness to seriously explore alternatives. Currently, the Eritrean and Tigrean insurgencies appear to be making their most serious bid in more than a decade to accomplish the de facto separation of these two regions from Ethiopia. The possibilities for international assistance in encouraging mediation between the government and the liberation movements remain yet to be fully explored. Thus, Ethiopia's prospects are doubly beclouded—by whether the revolutionary prospect remains real or has become a mirage, and by whether the integrity of the modern Ethiopian state can ultimately be spared grievous damage.

NOTES

¹These works are Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); John W. Harbeson, *The Ethiopian Transformation: The Quest for the Post Imperial State*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1988); Edmond Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People's Republic*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988); and John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). These academic studies are complemented by Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears* (Trenton, New Jersey: Red Sea Press, 1989), a first person account by a senior Ethiopian administrator now living and working in the United States.

²I will employ the term transformation, because, as explained in my book, I think to refer to events in Ethiopia as a revolution begs certain key questions that are the focus of analysis in each of the books considered here.

³Because Dawit's work is a first person account of his experiences in the Mengistu government rather than a theoretically oriented examination of the Ethiopian transformation, this paper will center on the other four recent studies.

⁴Op. cit., Clapham, pp. 1-2.

⁵Op. cit., Clapham, p. 3.

⁶"Hegemony and State Softness: Some Variations in Elite Responses" in Zaki Ergas, *The African State in Transition*, (New York and London, forthcoming).

⁷Op. cit., Keller, p. 265.

⁸Op. cit., Keller, p. 7.

⁹Skocpol, Theda. 1979. *States and Social Revolutions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

¹⁰Op. cit., Markakis, p. 270.

¹¹Op. cit., Markakis, p. 273.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

- ¹⁴Christopher Clapham, *Haile Selassie's Government*, (New York: Praeger, 1969)
- ¹⁵Op. cit., Clapham, *Selassie's Government*, pp 27-8.
- ¹⁶Op. cit., Clapham, *Selassie's Government*, p. 21.
- ¹⁷Op. cit. Clapham, *Selassie's Government*, pp. 24-5.
- ¹⁸S.N. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires*, (London [New York]: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).
- ¹⁹Op. cit., Keller, p. 67.
- ²⁰Op. cit., Keller, p. 124 ff.
- ²¹Op. cit., Markakis, p. 45.
- ²²Op. cit., Markakis, p. 274.
- ²³John Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974) p. 190.
- ²⁴Op. cit., Clapham, *Transformation*, p. 31.
- ²⁵Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*, (Heinemann, 1976).
- ²⁶Harold Marcus, *Ethiopia, Great Britain, and the United States: The Politics of Empire*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
- ²⁷Op. cit., Clapham, *Transformation*, p. 32.
- ²⁸Op. cit., Clapham, *Transformation*, p. 35.
- ²⁹Op. cit., Keller, p. 136.
- ³⁰Op. cit., Keller, p. 138.
- ³¹Op. cit., Keller, p. 146.
- ³²Op. cit., Markakis, *Ethiopia*.
- ³³Dawit Wolde Giorgis' *Red Tears*, op. cit., makes this point with great clarity.
- ³⁴The term "post-imperial" as used here refers to Ethiopia after the reigns of the emperors. It implies no judgment on the question of whether and to what extent Ethiopia remains an empire.
- ³⁵Op. cit., Markakis, *National and Class*, p. 271.
- ³⁶Keller speaks of the buildup of coercive power of the state as a foundation for the establishment of the WPE, op.cit., p. 234. Markakis argues that the armed forces have "remained the central pillar of regime and state." Op. cit., Markakis, *National and Class*, p. 266.
- ³⁷Gunner Myrdal, *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*, (Twentieth Century Fund, 1968)
- ³⁸Op. cit., Markakis, *National and Class*, p. 273.
- ³⁹Goran Hyden, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania: Underdevelopment and an Uncaptured Peasantry*, (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1980) and his *No Shortcuts to Progress: African Development Management in Perspective* (Heinemann, 1983).
- ⁴⁰Op. cit., Clapham, *Transformation*, p. 2.