BOOK REVIEWS

Reviewed Book: Zeleke, Elleni Centime (2019*). Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964–2016.* Historical materialism book series, 1570–1522, 201: Leiden–Boston, MA: Brill (281 pp.). ISBN: 978-9-004-41475-4.

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Zeleke's book attempts to rescue Marx's philosophical writings and the tradition of Frankfurt School Critical Theory from the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism through an intellectual history of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution and the ideas animating the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM), the revolution's intellectual vanguard. The book is dichotomously organized around an examination of the Ethiopian Revolution and a broader theorization of knowledge production in the Global South. The first half reconstructs the intellectual history of the ESM through a close reading of its journals and writings before tracing the migration of those ideas into state practice and contemporary Ethiopian politics. The second half situates this history within broader debates on Marxism, postcolonial theory, Eurocentrism, and the social sciences in Africa. Read together, the two sections reveal the book's broader political project: to recover Marx's philosophical writings and the tradition of Frankfurt School Critical Theory from the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism by using the Ethiopian Revolution, and the ESM, in particular, as the empirical terrain upon which this larger theoretical claim is advanced.

Its central claim is that the postcolonial critique correctly exposes the Eurocentric foundations of modern social science, while it does not warrant abandoning historical materialism or the tradition of Critical Theory as intellectual vehicles for thinking emancipation, political practice, and social transformation. Tracing the movement of ideas from revolutionary discourse into state practice and contemporary politics, the book demonstrates that knowledge production is itself a terrain of social struggle despite ESM's appeal to social-scientific objectivity and its commitment to an orthodox, teleological, and developmentalist reading of Marxism. The deployment of concepts drawn from Third World Marxism and mainstream Western social science

in the service of an emancipatory political project in Ethiopia, Zeleke argues, requires a more historically situated account of knowledge production in the Global South than existing postcolonial critiques have generally offered. ESM, thus, serves not simply as the object of historical inquiry but as the empirical site through which theoretical debates are advanced.

The ambitious claim, which Zeleke seeks to establish through the Ethiopian experience and the intellectual history of the ESM, gives the book its originality while simultaneously exposing its central analytical tensions. These tensions do not arise simply from the Ethiopian case itself, but from the additional theoretical demands that Ethiopia places on any account of knowledge production in the Global South. Ethiopia occupies an unusual position within the histories of colonialism, anti-colonial nationalism, and Third World Marxism: at once a site of anti-colonial resistance and an imperial state. Rather than undermining Zeleke's broader project, this ambiguity enlarges the very problem she sets out to address, raising further questions that the book gestures toward but only partially theorize.

The methodological ambitions pronounced from the opening chapter, proposes *Tizita* as an alternative way of approaching the Ethiopian Revolution through memory, the lingering afterlives of revolutionary violence (pp. 19-37). The melancholy, doom, and longing associated with *Tizita* songs accurately capture the social trauma and historical rupture produced by the revolution but sit uneasily with Zeleke's translation of *Tizita* as "memory," rather than the more accurate "nostalgia," the genre of songs to which it belongs. This defining moment of mistranslation also hints at the author's implicit positionality. Apart from a single song and a handful of English-language literary works produced in the diaspora, cultural production largely disappears from the remainder of the book. Literature, music, and other archival forms, through which the revolution continues to be remembered, are largely excluded in examining the relationship between knowledge and social practices. Nor does the revolutionary violence that animates the methodological opening become an object of sustained theoretical reflection in the chapters that follow. Instead, the alternative method announced in Chapter One gradually gives way to a more conventional intellectual history of texts and concepts, leaving readers wondering why *Tizita* and cultural memory are introduced as an alternative method only to recede from the analysis precisely where the relationship between knowledge and social practice is meant to be theorized.

This tension extends to the archive itself. A book devoted to knowledge production in Africa relies overwhelmingly on English-language sources, while debates surrounding the revolution continue to unfold in Amharic, Oromo, Somali, Tigrinya, Sidama, and numerous other linguistic traditions. Following social-scientific concepts adapted to African languages and local conceptual worlds would have provided precisely the kind of historically situated analysis of knowledge production, the book later opens windows through which those concepts are

appropriated, translated, and transformed. Although Zeleke interviewed former members of the ESM, she deliberately excludes those interviews from the analysis, relying instead almost exclusively on texts produced during the revolutionary period. Rather than avoiding the objectification of her interlocutors, as she suggests, this methodological decision fixes revolutionary actors within the conceptual universe of the 1960s and 1970s, reproducing the very positivist relationship between text and subject that the book elsewhere critiques. It also forecloses the possibility of tracing how former student activists have revised, defended, or abandoned their earlier commitments and how those ideas continue to shape contemporary Ethiopian political and intellectual life. Despite advocating a historically situated analysis of knowledge production, Zeleke remains largely silent about her own position within the history she narrates. Given her family's proximity to the imperial state, a relationship she briefly alludes to in the opening chapter, a more explicit engagement with her own positionality would have strengthened both the methodological reflections introduced at the outset and the book's broader argument that knowledge production is always historically situated.

The decision to privilege contemporaneous texts over retrospective reflection, and the absence of sustained methodological reflexivity sit uneasily with the book's own call for a historically situated analysis of knowledge production. It also anticipates a broader tension that runs throughout the book: while Zeleke repeatedly insists that knowledge must be understood within its historical and social conditions of production, the archive itself remains remarkably circumscribed by the intellectual world of the ESM. Taken together, these omissions do not simply narrow the archive; they narrow the historical pathways through which the relationship between knowledge and social practice can be reconstructed.

Zeleke convincingly demonstrates that ESM was not simply a revolutionary movement but a producer of knowledge. The movement appropriated concepts from Marxism and the social sciences to reinterpret Ethiopia's past, diagnose its present, and imagine a revolutionary future. More importantly, she traces the movement of those concepts beyond the revolutionary period itself. Ideas first articulated in students' journals reappear decades later within state policy, notably the EPRDF's development discourse, including the 2005 election disputes and popular protests that followed later. Knowledge, on this account, does not merely describe political reality; it actively participates in producing it as social-scientific concepts gradually institutionalized and naturalized, eventually functioning as seemingly neutral arbiter of political and social conflict.

It is precisely because the book succeeds so convincingly in tracing the political life of concepts that it invites a broader historical question. ESM appears as the principal site through which Marxism and Western social science are appropriated into an emancipatory anti-colonial

political project. Yet, the genealogy of such appropriations extends well beyond the ESM itself. It is here that the book's critique of Ethiopian exceptionalism and its broader intervention into the politics of knowledge production begin to pull in different directions.

Positioning the book against the discourse of Ethiopian exceptionalism, Zeleke's reconstruction of the intellectual history of the revolution inadvertently reproduces one of its defining assumptions: that Addis Ababa and its intelligentsia constitute the privileged site from which the history of modern Ethiopia, and the politics of knowledge itself, can be narrated. Consequently, the intellectual traditions of Oromo, Somali, Eritrean, Sidama, and other nationalist scholars who regarded the Ethiopian state itself as colonial formation and developed competing anti-colonial political vocabularies are largely excluded. This is not simply a question of representational balance or archival completeness. Rather, it enlarges the theoretical problem the book seeks to address. ESM ceases to appear as one moment within a longer history of knowledge production and instead becomes the paradigmatic site through which Western social science and Marxism are appropriated into an emancipatory political project.

Yet, the appropriation of Western knowledge in Ethiopia neither begins nor ends with the ESM. From Menelik II onward, successive imperial and post-imperial elites mobilized the languages of civilization, Christianity, modernization, development, science, and later Marxism to authorize projects of conquest, state formation, imperial expansion, and revolutionary transformation. ESM inherited this longer genealogy and, consequently, appears as the paradigmatic site of appropriation when it is better understood as one episode within broader history of knowledge, empire, and political authority geared towards revolutionary ends. Situating the ESM within this broader history would not diminish its significance. It instead expanded the book's central problematic beyond the appropriation of Eurocentrism in historical analyses, addressing crucial questions of how, by whom, and toward what political ends such appropriations are mobilized.

The historical chapters therefore leave the reader with two distinct impressions. On the one hand, they offer one of the most compelling intellectual histories of the ESM currently available, demonstrating with remarkable clarity how social-scientific concepts migrated from revolutionary discourse into state practice and eventually came to structure contemporary political life. On the other hand, they raise questions that exceed the historical frame within which the movement is situated. If ESM inherited rather than inaugurated the appropriation of Western knowledge in Ethiopia, how should we understand its place within the longer history of knowledge production, empire, and state formation? More fundamentally, if knowledge production itself is a terrain of social struggle, what distinguishes emancipatory appropriations of Eurocentric knowledge from

those mobilized in the service of empire, modernization, or revolutionary violence? It is precisely these questions that the second half of the book seeks to answer by turning from the Ethiopian Revolution to broader debates on Marxism, postcolonial theory, and the social sciences in Africa.

It is in the second half of the book that Zeleke's broader theoretical ambitions become fully visible. Through the ESM, she enters into conversation with Mudimbe,[1] Chakrabarty,[2] Mamdani,[3] Mbembe,[4] Benjamin,[5] Horkheimer & Adorno,[6] and other postcolonial and critical theorists in order to argue that while the postcolonial critique correctly exposed the Eurocentric foundations of modern social science, it remained largely confined to questions of epistemology, representation, and discourse. Against this tendency, she seeks to recover Marx's philosophical writings and the tradition of Frankfurt School Critical Theory as resources for reconnecting knowledge production to capitalism, political practice, historical transformation, and emancipation after the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism. The book's central theoretical wager is, therefore, not simply to defend Marx against postcolonial criticism but to recover a non-Eurocentric Critical Theory capable of explaining political transformation without reproducing either positivist social science or the epistemological relativism into which Zeleke believes much of postcolonial theory ultimately retreats.

The Ethiopian case, however, exhibits additional layer of theoretical difficulty that extends beyond the reconciliation of Marxian Critical Theory and postcolonial critiques of knowledge that the book attempts. Ethiopia occupies an unusual position within the histories of colonialism, anti-colonial nationalism, and Third World Marxism. As one of the few African states to resist formal colonial incorporation while simultaneously consolidating itself as an imperial polity, Ethiopia unsettles many of the conceptual distinctions through which postcolonial theory has traditionally approached questions of Eurocentrism, nationalism, and decolonization. The Ethiopian historiography, therefore, requires an account of how universal claims to knowledge become politically authorized within a social formation that has been simultaneously anti-colonial and

[1] Mudimbe, V. Y. (1988). *The invention of Africa: Gnosis, philosophy, and the order of knowledge*. Indiana University Press.
[2] Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*. Princeton University Press.
[3] Mamdani, M. (1996). *Citizen and subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*. Princeton University Press.
[4] Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the postcolony*. University of California Press.
[5] Benjamin, W. (2007). *Illuminations* (H. Arendt, Ed.; H. Zohn, Trans.). Schocken Books. (Original work published 1955)
[6] Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. W. (2002). *Dialectic of enlightenment: Philosophical fragments* (G. S. Noerr, Ed.; E. Jephcott, Trans.). Stanford University Press. (Original work published 1947)

imperial, emancipatory and exclusionary, revolutionary and state building. It is precisely because Ethiopia occupies this contradictory historical position that the relationship between Marxism, Eurocentrism, empire, and knowledge production becomes considerably more difficult than the existing terms of the debate allow. It is against this expanded problematic that the limits of the book's theoretical intervention become apparent.

Throughout the second half Zeleke repeatedly insists that the problem of knowledge production in Africa cannot remain confined to epistemology and instead must move toward questions of social ontology. Yet, this movement is more often asserted than enacted. The discussion remains overwhelmingly organized around debates on representation, epistemology, Eurocentrism, and critique, while the promised ontology never fully materializes. Although the book repeatedly gestures toward recovering Critical Theory as a basis for political practice after the postcolonial critique of knowledge, the political and intellectual project implied by that recovery remains largely implicit, forcing the reader to reconstruct it from a series of negations directed against positivism, developmentalism, orthodox Marxism, Eurocentrism, and postcolonial theory. Consequently, the book is considerably more developed than the alternative it seeks to establish, precisely within the confines of critique it promises to move beyond it. This has profound, not merely conceptual, consequences for how the relationship between knowledge and political practice is understood. This demands an account of how regimes of knowledge translate into state authority in the name of emancipation, progress, modernization and revolutionary terror, thereby, institutionalizing violence as political logic of the state. It also requires theorizing the mediations through which knowledge becomes authority, authority becomes violence, and critique eventually becomes mechanism through which political domination is exercised and sustained.

Ultimately, the book leaves the reader with unresolved question than the one it sets out to answer. If the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism is insufficient and orthodox Marxism politically untenable, what form of Critical Theory remains? It is this larger project, one that the Ethiopian experience itself demands, that *Ethiopia in Theory* intimately gestures but never fully articulates. Nevertheless, Zeleke's creative work is an important value addition to scholars interested in multitude of questions pertinent to social sciences, state making, revolution, knowledge production and intellectual history in Africa and the Global South.