

Chapter VIII

Derailed Modernization: The Derg's Phase

The cultural trait making higher social positions into contested temporary occupations (see Chapter III on *idil*) should have found, in the modernization process of evicting outdated, anti-modern occupants, an even better opportunity to vent itself. In the traditional system, power struggles opposed ambitious individuals who shared common values and a mutual understanding of social life. The struggle did not go beyond the act of changing places in a fixed social framework. However, as a result of the impact of exogenous modern ideas, the struggle shifted to a confrontation between elites with different ideologies and social programs. These elites want to use state power either to definitively change the social system in their favor or to counter those who are planning a change perceived as hostile to them. Understandably, the disagreement over values and social ideals turns the struggle into an irreconcilable confrontation, whose sole solution is revolution, that is, the complete overthrow of ruling elites, on the one hand, and, on the other, the elimination of all those perceived as rivals. Put differently, under the impact of modern means of suppression and antagonistic social values, the old power struggle turned into a fight between exclusive social visions targeting the elimination of opponents. The distortion of political competition into a form of violent exclusion over ideological differences can be said to have taken a firm root in Ethiopia with the radicalization of the student movement and its aftermaths, to wit, the emergence of the Derg and the adoption of socialism.

The Radicalization of the Derg

Besides the rapidity and ease with which the imperial system was overthrown, the surprising thing is that an ad hoc committee engineered and executed the overthrow. Without a doubt, the explosion of social unrests and the inability of the existing government to quell the outbreak have prepared the ground for some form of military intervention. Even so, the expectation was that senior officers would lead the intervention, most probably in the form of a coup ushering in the establishment of a military government. Instead, the Derg, that is, an elected committee in which the highest rank was that of major, took the leading role. The emergence of the Derg and the series of rapid and aggressive actions it took brought about the collapse of the military hierarchy, thereby preventing a coup from above.

The Derg quickly displayed its political ambition: it demanded and obtained the appointment of a new prime minister and a new defense minister; it also started to arrest high officials of the imperial regime, who were either accused of being corrupt or of obstructing the ongoing change. These actions were clear stepping stones toward the seizure of political power, which became effective when the Emperor was deposed on September 12, 1974. The greatest surprise of all was, however, the radicalization of the Derg, given that it was posterior to Haile Selassie's overthrow and that most members of the Derg, if not all, did not have a prior

commitment to the Marxist-Leninist ideology. The question of radicalization is all the more perplexing the more one recalls that the Derg initially came up with a nationalist ideology whose main slogan was *Ethiopia Tikdem* (Ethiopia First). So radical a turn from a nationalist platform to the ideology of “scientific” socialism in a matter of months was bound to raise controversy among scholars of the Ethiopian Revolution.

Without entering into the actual controversy, we can say for sure that the radicalization was the result of a process during which various choices were contemplated and vehemently debated.¹ According to Zenebe Feleke, who was a close observer of the Derg, three different positions slowly emerged during the early meetings of the Derg. One large group supported the idea of a constitutional monarchy, while another group called for the establishment of an elected civilian government. A third group argued for a direct military government.² Granted the part played by radical students and intellectuals in the Derg’s radicalization, still the important question is to know how a small extremist group within the Derg prevailed over the larger moderate group.

Explaining the Derg’s radicalization is elucidating the reason why it did not stick to its initial nationalist ideology of “Ethiopia First,” which was after all more suited to a military personnel. Neither the pressure of the civilian left nor that of already radicalized members, if any, within the Derg is enough to explain it. It is not enough because the nationalist ideology was adopted, in the first place, to draw a demarcating line between leftist politics, represented by students and intellectuals, and the moderate stand of most members of the Derg. It would be naïve to assume that the moderates were just seduced by the convincing power of students and intellectuals. One thing is sure, nonetheless: in an ad hoc committee composed of people with disparate outlooks and coming from different social and educational backgrounds and in which the customary chain of command has been suspended, only some vague nationalist platform could provide a temporary agreement. However, underneath the agreement, a Hobbesian situation of struggle, fraught with all kinds of possibilities, prevailed. In the nuanced words of a scholar, “many of the splits in the *dergue* may have had ideological overtones, but they must also be categorized as struggles for power.”³

The most credible way to understand how Derg members, who previously had disparate beliefs and were strangers to one another, drastically shifted to radical ideas in a relatively short time, is to assume that radicalization appeared to them as the most appropriate stand to preserve and strengthen their newly acquired power. Instead of ideological commitment being prior to the capture of power, the seizure and exercise of power explain the adoption of extreme leftist ideas. The evolution from the original nationalist slogan of *Ethiopia Tikdem* (Ethiopia First) in 1974 to scientific socialism in 1976 via *Ye-Ethiopia Hibretebewinet* (Ethiopian Socialism) in 1975 reflects the various stages tying the Derg’s ascent to absolute power with radicalization. It makes sense to say that the need to conserve power accounts for the conversion to leftist extremism if the conversion appeared to most Derg members as a *sine qua non* for the retention of absolute power. The sense it makes is even more manifest when we keep in mind that the highest rank in the Derg was that of major. This fact deprived the Derg of any entitlement to state power, and so multiplied contestants from various sectors, especially from the higher strata of the social and military ladders. Social radicalism precisely fills the lack of entitlement with a revolutionary entitlement, the very one that paints the Derg as the righter of wrongs, the dispenser of justice for the exploited and the poor.

The Derg's Struggles for Power and their Radicalizing Effects

Among the groups that challenged the Derg, we find the old aristocracy, the landed nobility, the bureaucrats, the educated middle class, and the influential civilian left. Most of all, imminent danger came from the military, in particular from senior officers, officers of elite units, and those who graduated from elite military schools. The Derg's monopoly of power was necessary to neutralize these contenders, provided it went beyond a pure military dictatorship with a nationalist ideology. Especially, the denunciation of the top echelon of the military hierarchy as a reactionary force opposing change was the best way to counter the threats coming from the military. As to the civilian left, nothing could neutralize it more than the appropriation and effective implementation of its ideology of socialism. Moreover, the more the changes are disruptive of the status quo, the more they call for and justify the use of the repressive forces of the state. Indeed, what else could better justify the Derg's monopoly of power but the introduction and forceful enforcement of radical changes, those very changes that require the complete dismantling of the existing system of power? The civilian left should be commended for popularizing the generous vision of socialism. Still, the most important part being the implementation of the vision, the full control of power should fall into the hands of the Derg. Obviously, as the single organized force, only the Derg is able to implement radical changes and protect them against countering forces.

The initial fragility of the Derg further validates the derivation of radicalization from a social context that unleashed an open and unpredictable power struggle. From the moment of its inception, the fate of the Derg looked highly precarious, not only because of the leftist opposition, but primarily because, as already said, of the opposition from within the armed forces. As one author writes, "no one expected the Dergue to last so long. It was a common thing to wager on its imminent collapse, particularly in view of the number and variety of its enemies."⁴ Without a dictatorial power and, subsequently, the recourse to a violent form of government, the Derg could not have survived. And what could unify more the young officers, non-commissioned officers, and privates composing the Derg than the defense of a radical social program committed to the cause of workers and peasants, the realization of which cannot, of course, happen without the use of violent means?

The need to counter growing threats explains why the Derg reversed its initial pledge, stated in the platform of Ethiopia *Tikdem*, to effect change without any bloodshed. It is because the urgent matter for the Derg was the control of absolute power that it could not be content, like so many third-world governments, with simply talking about socialism without implementing it. Without the implementation of a radical program of change, the Derg could not prevail over so many challengers. The essential purpose of the drastic revolutionary measures was, therefore, the institution of a system of government that not only provided effective and unfettered control, but also defended a social program sanctioned at that time nationally and internationally by the prestigious ideology of socialism. So that, survival was indeed the most important reason for radicalization. To quote Fred Halliday and Maxine Molyneux, "If it was to survive, the PMAC [the Derg] had to destroy the socio-economic foundations of the old regime. This involved expropriation, a measure of mass mobilization, and the extension of state control throughout society."⁵

In taking radical measures, such as the nationalization of all lands and industries, the Derg surprised everybody, including the civilian left, but even more so created a highly chaotic situation that could even lead to civil wars. In so doing, the committee instilled into the minds of many

people, notably of the armed forces, the fear that overthrowing the Derg had turned into a risky course of action, all the more so as the removal would amount to reversing measures that had become popular, especially among southern peasants. In other words, the revolutionary measures have so exasperated the social situation that the Derg became indispensable and alone able to keep under control the issuing inevitable social disruptions. It is not an exaggeration to say that the radical measures of the Derg took the country, notably the armed forces, as hostages. A note of caution, though: because the revolutionary option was a means to grab absolute power, it does not mean that its implementation was not somewhat sincere. Without some measure of sincerity in the application of the measures, the committee and its members would neither have secured actual survival nor enjoyed the absolute power they aspired to achieve. What at the beginning was just a necessary tool can even turn into a calling, especially when it is backed by popular support and resisted by advocates of the discredited regime.

Side by side with the insurrectional atmosphere created by the agitations of the student movement and the mistakes and miscalculations of high officials of the imperial regime, as discussed in the last chapter, an important radicalizing factor was the rivalries that divided the Derg from within. The nationalist program of “Ethiopia First” was not enough for most members of the Derg, not because of the strength of the civilian left, but because the program would have soon exposed the unnecessary of the Derg for the implementation of a policy that retreats from effecting structural changes. The major event that supports this interpretation is the conflict with Aman Andom, a very popular general that the Derg appointed as acting head of state. The conflict convinced many members of the Derg that a moderate policy would entail a reorganization of the Derg in the direction of favoring its most educated members at the expense of the less educated. In effect, arguing that the disparate composition of the Derg made it unable to become an effective ruling body, General Aman proposed to restructure “the 120-man Dergue into a smaller body” while the rest would return to the barracks.⁶ Unsurprisingly, the proposal infuriated the majority of Derg members, especially Mengistu, who did not graduate from an elite academy. As a result, all those threatened by the proposal rallied around Mengistu. Soon after, a shootout occurred resulting in the death of General Aman. By killing a popular general, the Derg found itself in an ominous situation. It needed an immediate diversion: hence “on the same night, after a hastily taken vote, 59 officials of the former Government and high-ranking military officers were executed. This decision evidently marked the ascendancy of the most radical faction within the *Derg*.”⁷ On December 20, 1974, that is, a month after the executions, the official adoption of socialism was announced. The series of nationalizations followed in the next few months. This rapid revolutionary escalation confirms the deliberate recourse to a scorched-earth policy as the best way to ensure the survival of the Derg.

It is important to keep in mind that the intra-Derg conflicts and their resolutions are inseparable from Mengistu’s ascent to the complete control of the Derg and, by extension, to absolute power over the country. Another memorable moment of the elimination of rivals within the Derg occurred on February 3, 1977, when “Mengistu launched his own surprise coup by executing seven of the leaders of the minority faction including General Teferi Bante, the new head of state.”⁸ After the elimination of his opponents, Mengistu imposed all his wishes on the Derg, which had de facto ceased to exist as a collective body. He became Head of State and Chairman of the Derg and immediately launched the Red Terror campaign to wipe out the civilian left, in particular the main contending force on the left, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party and its followers.

Given the crucial role of Mengistu, no study of the Ethiopian Revolution can claim to be thorough unless it elucidates the contribution of his personality in ensuring his triumph as well as his later defeat. It is highly doubtful that the military takeover would have taken such a radical turn without the struggle for power launched by Mengistu. What we know about Mengistu's life, the manner he rose to absolute power, and his later pitiful downfall point to a narcissistic personality. My contention is that not only is Mengistu's narcissism an undeniable factor in his radicalization, but it also explains both his rise to absolute power by defeating his adversaries, who had some advantages over him, and his downfall.

According to one scholar, the essential features of narcissism are:

A grandiose sense of self-importance or uniqueness and preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success and power; hypersensitivity to criticism; and a lack of empathy. Self-esteem, while outwardly appearing high, is actually quite fragile, with a need for constant attention and admiration.⁹

The application of the features of narcissism to radicalization shows how nicely a Stalinist type of socialism fits Mengistu's quest for grandeur, admiration, and absolute power. In espousing the lofty cause of socialism in its radical version, Mengistu found a sustainer for his need for a grandiose self-image as well as for his pronounced promptness for the use of violence. In the case of Mengistu, it is true to say, "traits like narcissism and a heightened power drive, whatever their origins, are necessary to sustain a commitment to radical social change."¹⁰ Though many aspects of Mengistu's life, such as education, physical appearance, family background, and military experience, disadvantaged him in comparison to his main rivals, and his victory over them looked very unlikely, he was able to surmount these obstacles thanks to the advantages that his narcissism gave him. Abilities that are typical of narcissistic personalities, such as high determination, manipulation, craving for power, cruelty, etc., are the weapons that Mengistu used to triumph over his opponents. The contribution of his narcissistic traits to his downfall is no less obvious. Though he created an impressive military machine, it was unable to fight in an efficient and sustained manner because it was undermined by his narcissistic defects, such as paranoia, grandiosity, preference for loyalty over competence, inflexibility, recklessness, and inability to quell emotion. Because of these defects, his tight leadership over military operations was marred with mistakes, setbacks, and unnecessary and reckless waste of human life and military resources. Northern guerrilla forces were finally able to defeat the army after a prolonged and extremely bloody and costly war.

Controversies over the Revolution

While there is a large consensus on the occurrence of a radical revolution in Ethiopia, disagreements arise when it comes to evaluating its performance. The detrimental consequences of the revolution on the country nourish the disagreements to a great extent. Indeed, as many scholars maintain, if one put together the sharp and wholesale economic decline, the secession of Eritrea and its damaging fallouts, including the fact that Ethiopia became landlocked, and the establishment of a perilous system of ethnic federalism subsequent to the Derg's total defeat, the 17 years of the Derg's rule can be rightly described as a colossal calamity. Without exaggeration, the rule can be summed up as a continuous civil war during which a great number of people either lost their lives or were forced to flee the country. Moreover, the policy of socialism and the

diplomatic alliance with the Soviet camp entailed a drastic deterioration of Western economic aid and involvement in Ethiopia, a loss for which socialist countries were nowhere near to providing a substitute. In a word, in terms of advancing modernization, the revolutionary therapy did no more than gravely worsen the ills of Ethiopian society.

In view of such disastrous outcomes, should we conclude that nothing positive can be said about the Ethiopian Revolution? While it is quite tempting to characterize the revolution as a catastrophe, an unqualified denigration would be both amnesic and premature. All those countries that have gone through a similar type of social revolution have experienced, it is true with varying degrees, destructions and economic decline. Nevertheless, their historians have come up with sober judgments distinguishing negative outcomes from positive realizations. The point is that revolutions are not accidents; they are products of definite social impediments that are such that only massive social upheavals and transformations can remove them. In light of this need for dislocating changes, an objective assessment of revolutions must include the inevitability, even the prevalence of negative developments.

For Karl Marx, as an outcome of class struggle, a thorough-going social change cannot be merely evolutionary; it requires a break in continuity as a result of which a radically different social system comes into being. Some such break is bound to cause extensive destructions. Modernization theory has developed a different approach by making revolution the exception rather than the rule. Revolution is not how history evolves, but how exceptional circumstances blocking evolution are removed. For modernization theory, "the actual experience of revolution is essentially a corrective to lagging social and political adjustments and a painful learning process of trial and (mostly) error."¹¹ Fully endorsing an evolutionary scheme, the theory maintains that society develops gradually. However, when an abnormal condition is created, such as long-lasting autocratic or caste regimes, society cannot reconnect with the evolutionary process unless a violent revolution removes the obstacle. While for Marx revolutions are necessary, being but the law of social change, for modernization theory, they are corrective measures for exceptional circumstances. Given the rarity of social revolutions, the position of modernization theory seems more historically grounded than the Marxist view.

Let us agree that revolutions are necessary to remove entrenched and tenacious obstacles hatched by autocratic or dynastic regimes. Still, this presumed positive goal does not explain the engagement in a type of change that brings about extreme and unnecessary consequences. As was the case with the two classical examples of radical revolution, to wit, the Russian and French Revolutions, moderates first controlled the revolutions until radicals overthrew them. While the first phase was indeed necessary to correct the anomaly, the second phase, the radical phase, was altogether unnecessary and highly detrimental. Thus, evaluating the French Revolution, Alexis de Tocqueville speaks positively of its first phase, which he characterizes as "a time of youth, enthusiasm, pride, a time of generous and sincere emotions, whose memory, despite its mistakes, will always be preserved by humanity."¹² By contrast, he is highly critical of the second phase in that he sees a derailment caused by "errors and miscalculations," as a result of which the French "forgetting liberty" surrendered to oppression and tyranny as well as to war fever.¹³ The cause for this derailment is the intrusion and ascendancy of an egalitarian ideology in the second phase, which ascendancy can only be achieved by going against freedom. It is obvious that the goal of equality cannot be implemented without crippling freedom by recourse to a dictatorial rule. Luckily, France was able to reverse course and resume the much more promising path of evolutionary change.

At this stage, it is necessary to give a conceptual framework to a distinction between two types of revolution. Many theoreticians of revolution use the qualification “great” when they speak of the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions. Such revolutions as the American or the English Revolutions are not usually included in the category of “great revolutions,” mainly because the intensity and depth of their transformations are not comparable to those of the “great revolutions.” Unlike the deep and sweeping upheavals of the Russian or Chinese Revolution, “the American War of Independence resulted in a change of government, but it was not accompanied by a massive social upheaval. And what some call the English Revolution, others call the English Civil War.”¹⁴ Another qualification is used to signify the same thing: whereas the American and English Revolutions are defined as “political revolutions,” revolutions that result in deeper transformations, like the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions “are sometimes referred to as ‘great’ or ‘social’ revolutions.”¹⁵

The difference between the two types of revolution is not hard to define concretely. As the expression indicates, a political revolution is a violent, unconstitutional overthrow of a state or a political regime resulting in the enthronement of a new and reformist political elite. A social revolution, in addition to accomplishing the overthrow of a political regime, goes deeper and causes transformations in the socioeconomic and cultural spheres. It “entails not only mass mobilization and regime change, but also more or less rapid and fundamental social, economic, and /or cultural change during or soon after the struggle for state power.”¹⁶

The difference can be expressed otherwise if we say that the purpose of political revolutions is to transform the state and remove all or part of the ruling political elite for the purpose of introducing reforms modernizing the social system. The reforms are adjusting the lagging political structure to the requirement of economic modernization, but fall short of altering the class structure of the society. Social revolutions alter the class structure and the functioning of the economic system, and so are more radical. The difference between the two revolutions is not, therefore, simply one of degree or intensity. The difference in intensity is itself expressive of a difference in kind deriving from dissimilar social goals or projects. Political revolutions are corrections or synchronizations; they “occur mainly when new economic and social developments have already begun to transform society, but where existing political rulers and institutions are tending to hold back further changes.”¹⁷ Basically, political revolutions attempt to further modernization by removing political systems that are at odds with economic advancement. A characteristic case is when a landed aristocracy preserves its political supremacy in a modernizing society. In such a case, the removal of the political elite opens the path of reforms for the expansion of modernization.

Social revolutions have a much higher social ambition. Going beyond the concern of reforming or correcting the social system, they want “to transfer economic assets and power, and social and political status and privileges, from one social group to another.”¹⁸ They do so through the espousal of an egalitarian ideology, the realization of which requires the alteration of the class structure of society. Not only are social revolutions more deep-going and violent than political revolutions, but they also harbor the goal of transforming human existence in a redemptive fashion, and so come under an inspiration that can be characterized as utopian. As such, they are, to a great degree, ideologically driven revolutions. Revolutions inspired by the Marxist ideology provide the best examples of this type of revolution.

The case of Ethiopia followed the pattern of Russia and China. It did not stop at the political level, which would have allowed the implementation of relevant reforms. Instead, it ventured, in the name of socialism, into the egalitarian path whose predictable outcomes were dictatorial rule,

severe economic decline, and exasperation of social conflicts. As we saw in Chapter VII, Ethiopia went through two revolutionary phases, a moderate phase and then a second, more radical phase in conjunction with the rise of Mengistu to the undisputed leadership of the Derg. The occurrence of a two-phased revolution provides the framework for the disputes over the assessment of the revolutionary change. Unsurprisingly, positive assessments came mostly from scholars belonging to what was then called the Eastern Bloc countries. Outside the socialist camp, a scholar like Peter Schwab maintained that “for most Ethiopians the revolution has been beneficial, as it championed their needs.”¹⁹ The statement basically means that the Derg has effectively liberated the working people from a feudo-imperial state and severe economic exploitation, an outcome that could not have been achieved without the use of violent methods. The emergence of a revolutionary and ruthless power was necessary to dismantle a regime based on the combination of class and ethnic domination. Insofar as such a regime was not reformable, there was no other choice than a radical revolution, with all the excesses that this kind of social change inevitably entails.

Scholars who oppose such a favorable assessment raise the objection that the Ethiopian Revolution did not bring about any improvement in the conditions of life of working people. On the contrary, working people went through severe economic hardships, despite the sweeping measures of nationalization. Politically, the revolution brought about a regime more dictatorial and violent than the imperial regime. Moreover, it caused military defeats whose consequences were the loss of Eritrea and the boosting of ethnonationalist ideology and parties. Since conditions in Ethiopia went from bad to worse, for scholars opposing both the Derg and the idea of socialism the revolution was simply an “unqualified disaster.”²⁰

On the other hand, there are scholars and groups, mostly leftist, who even question the revolutionary nomenclature of the Derg and speak of counterrevolution. For instance, the EPRP characterized the Derg as a fascist regime determined to prevent the seizure of political power by the civilian left. For all those who speak of counterrevolution, the implemented transformations revealed more continuity with past practices than change. Rather than a real shift, “they believe the changes wrought by the regime to be superficial, concealing a present-day and likely future continuity in the underlying socioeconomic and political realities in the country.”²¹ Notably, the nature of the Ethiopian state under the Derg showed much continuity with the imperial regime. As expected, ethnonationalist scholars shared this analysis; for them, too, continuity prevailed over change. Despite the radical measures, the Derg neither abolished the “colonial” hegemony of the Amhara over other ethnic groups nor demolished the authoritarian and centralized character of the Ethiopian state. On the contrary, these two major impediments were strengthened to a degree never reached before. The main consequence of this lack of change was the explosion of civil war in various parts of the country.

The major problem with those who denounce counterrevolution is that their position amounts to saying, directly or indirectly, that a radical revolution did not occur in Ethiopia. Because what they expected did not come to pass, they concluded that a revolutionary change did not happen or that it was overthrown. As to those who admit that a radical revolution took place but maintain that it failed to deliver on its promises of freedom, prosperity, and social peace, their assessment is closer to reality. However, they need to acknowledge two things: 1) revolution in the political sense was necessary, given the social and political deadlock caused by the imperial autocracy; 2) the cause of the failure is the engagement in the second radical phase. The distinction between the two types of revolution teaches us that political revolution is necessary to remove the social stalemate and resume the normal process of evolution. However, the removal is not immune from contingencies: even though political revolution is enough to change course, conditions can

become so uncertain that radical groups advocating utopian ideologies can emerge and seize power, thereby leading the society into the path of social revolution. This is to say that political revolutions always carry the risk of allowing radical groups to come to power.

My contention is that the path taken by Ethiopia is exactly the path of political revolution hijacked by an extremist military group, even though the commitment to egalitarian ideology originally came from the input of students and intellectuals. The atmosphere of radicalism that Ethiopia's educated elite created facilitated the emergence of the Derg, which, owing to its unconventional composition and rise to power, could not rule otherwise than through a policy of radical social change. The uncertainties surrounding the occurrence of a political revolution contain the danger of empowering eccentric groups and individuals with questionable moral standards and dubious motivations. These people easily espouse an egalitarian ideology and what goes with it, namely, the exercise of unlimited power. The question of knowing which of the two, ideology or dictatorial power comes first, is immaterial, since the one entails the other. The Derg quickly and easily adopted the Marxist-Leninist ideology because it came with the absolute power that it needed to eliminate all other contending groups. Insofar as the socialist utopia promotes lower classes and advocates the concentration of all power in the hands of a few (if not one) individuals, it came in handy for the legitimization and consolidation of a marginal group of junior officers and NCOs.

Disjunction between State Power and Modernization

Viewed from the perspective of modernizing Ethiopia, the socialist ideology that the Derg adopted was highly consistent with the belief that eliminating traditional features was a sine qua non for unlocking the process of modernization. Mengistu was all the more receptive to the belief, since the radical elimination of traditional features, notably of the nobility and the deference due to high military, civilian, and ecclesiastical officials, was in keeping with his narcissistic needs. Because he came from a lower social background and had received a poor education, he felt marginalized both in his childhood as well as his adult life. As a result, he had nurtured a deep grudge against Ethiopia's high society, which grudge suitably fitted the tenets of revolutionary socialism. The determination and violent method with which he eliminated the upper class had a palpable revengeful dimension.

The irony was that Mengistu's elimination of what was left of tradition exhibited a striking continuity with Haile Selassie's regime both in terms of motive and method. In our review of the traditional system (see Chapter III), we indicated that it was characterized by social mobility based primarily on martial feats. Military prowess, especially in the service of the emperor, opened the door to higher social positions. The fact that political promotions depended on being the winner in war fights created a culture subordinating wealth and social status to political positions. The suggested continuity between Mengistu's regime and the imperial past stands out when we recall that Haile Selassie, finally realizing the absolutist dream of previous emperors, put an end to the open power struggle that defined the traditional system. The inevitable sequence tying rising with falling (see chapter discussing *idil*), the relative autonomy of the regional nobility and the Church, and the absence of hereditary entitlements were all features that made the traditional system function on the basis of the consensus visualizing power as an object of competition. However, beginning with Haile Selassie's modernizing attempt, the consensus vanished in favor of a conception of power as an exclusive right. In clear terms, it meant that the one who holds power must prevent competition by all means necessary.

What Haile Selassie's regime had achieved in the name of modernization reached its full development with Mengistu. Everything happened as though Mengistu could not be content with himself and his accomplishments unless his power surpassed that of his predecessors, for, as Karl Marx said, "the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living."²² Indeed, his notion of exclusive power exceeded the imperial standard thanks to an even tighter centralization of power, the nationalization of economic life, and the institution of a totalitarian system of government. To the extent that these changes completely disrupted the established system of power, it elevated to power a new elite that had no other basis than its total allegiance to Mengistu. To make sure that loyalty is the overriding criterion, Mengistu created a party (see Chapter IV), WPE, whose Politburo and Central Committee members were personally chosen by him. So manufactured a party enabled Mengistu to bring all the apparatuses of the state, including the military and economic agencies, under his full control thanks to the omnipresent interventionism of the cadre of the party. Outside Mengistu, there was nothing to shore up the legitimacy of the elite's new-found status, since the revolutionary changes discarded all the norms previously used, like tradition, nepotism, preference, education, and merit, in favor of unconditional loyalty.

In disarticulating the workings of the social system, the revolutionary changes deprived rival elites of any means to effectively withstand the central authority. A repressive system purposely designed to eliminate would-be rivals replaced the traditional legitimacy of the winner in an open power game. As could be expected, this closed system of power divested the country of competent people and filled the higher echelon of power with sycophants. What is more, it encouraged the ethnicization of politics, since the demise of the traditional consensus as well as of all customary norms pushed competing elites to cultivate ethnic ties to counter the totalitarian policy of the central government (more on this in the next chapter). When everything else has been thrown out, what else remains but to fall back on primal tribal solidarity?

The promotion of incompetence and the recourse to ethnic politics did no more than weaken the unity of the country and, hence, its survival power. Moreover, nothing could be more detrimental to the requirements of modernization than the continuation of the primacy of political power when the objective is no longer just the survival of a polity. More exactly, when survival is conditional on the possession of modern material forces, the development of which necessitates a host of deep socioeconomic and cultural changes, including a power-sharing institutional arrangement. Accordingly, the discrepancy between the objective of modernization and the political system was both the defining feature of the revolutionism of the Derg and its Achilles heel.

Let us look closer at the discrepancy. Whereas achievements, especially economic ones, determine social status and influence in a modern setting, the primacy of the political can only sideline social mobility based on economic achievements, thereby preventing the emergence of a meritocratic society. In particular, where extensive scarcity and poverty prevail, those who hold the reins of the state and their followers will use their power to grab for themselves whatever wealth there is in the country. In thus subjugating economic activity to political status, they impose on it tight control and the narrow limits of their interests. And so long as political power is used to prevent the development of an autonomous economic sector, enough wealth will never be produced. The need to subsume the autonomy of the economic system to political requirements will become all the more imperative the more scarcity prevails and the more various elite groups compete, as was and still is the case in Ethiopia, for the control of power. In short, the complete

ascendancy of the political over the economic, insofar as it subordinates economic life to non-economic norms, is intrinsically unable to deliver economic growth.

Let there be no misunderstanding. I am perfectly aware of the objection according to which the choice of socialism signified the adoption of a policy deliberately opposed to the capitalist notion of free market. Nor do I ignore that the policy was based on the argument that only a state-controlled economy can work for the benefit of working people and produce enough wealth for them. Unfortunately, this kind of objection does not hold water when viewed from the vantage position of Karl Marx, who is after all the original and authentic thinker of revolutionary socialism. The belief that a policy, a conception imposed by sheer fiat can originate economic prosperity is at the antipode of Marxism. As pointed out in the Introduction, for authentic Marxism, socialism presupposes capitalist accumulation of wealth, so that it is the economic condition that calls for political change each time the political lags behind economic development, not the other way around. For those who fail to take into account this law of social development and attempt to bypass the necessary prerequisites, Marx's warning is that they create false problems, that is, problems that they cannot solve. If the solution is not already in gestation in the existing society, then no amount of political will and organizational strength can bend the society to the ideal vision that any person or a group of persons may have. It follows that the attempts of Leninism, Stalinism, Maoism, etc., to bypass capitalism and implement socialism by means of political dictates and control is a deviation and betrayal of Marxism. No wonder this type of socialism degenerated into dictatorship: the belief that the use of force, coercion, and centralized planning can bring about economic development in societies that are still predominantly precapitalist puts modernization on an upside-down course.

Seeing the efforts that were put in and their heavy prices, notably in terms of human costs, to bypass capitalism and produce some results, it is little convincing to attribute the deviation to a faulty understanding of Marxism. Instead, it makes better sense to assume that the main objective of the so-called socialist revolutions was to institute the political hegemony of some elite groups under the guise of a generous and attractive social utopia. Bluntly put, the socialist ideology was primarily used as a vehicle for absolute power rather than as a means to bypass capitalism through accelerated economic development. This understanding would certainly be in line with Marx's view of ideology as "false consciousness," that is, as a set of deceitful beliefs and ideas that are used as a smokescreen to hide the truth and justify the imposition of the power and interests of a given ruling class.²³ The primacy of power over economic concerns alone explains why, despite repeated failures, it took so long for socialist countries to realize the need for reforms in the direction of market economy. Indeed, it takes time to get to the point of losing faith in the promises of a belief as generous and captivating as the idea of socialism, especially when the belief is pinned to an established system of power.

The case of Ethiopia perfectly corroborates the ideological use of socialism to grab and consolidate absolute power, since it puts into play the ambition of a previously apolitical military group. In particular, the political ideas and organizational principles of socialism fitted Mengistu's craving for absolute power like a glove. Under his rule, the state was not just law and order; it was also the owner and manager of the entire economic system and the only framer of the ideological countenance of the country. The combination of all these attributes of the state meant that the essential function of law and order was to serve the political designs of Mengistu and his party. Yet, despite all this safeguard, his absolute power could not prevent the multiplication and expression of discontent caused by growing economic hardships. Where government runs the economy instead of market forces, competition is banned, and with it, all the factors that make

economic growth possible, namely, a free market that rewards innovations and productive investments, the end result of which is the availability of products in higher quantity and quality and at lower prices. Clearly, the non-competitive government-run economy is anything but congruent with modernization, given that economic growth is a major requirement of the modernization process. It is not enough to say that the socialist pursuit of equality is unattainable without economic growth; it must be added that the continuance of severe scarcity and poverty that seems to accompany dictatorial socialism actually worsens inequality. As underlined in previous chapters, contrary to traditionality, the main characteristic of modernity is the liberation of innovation, a trait that is obviously incompatible with the subordination of the entire social fabric to a hegemonic and exclusionary rule.

What Derg members, especially Mengistu, appreciated in the socialist ideology was the justification of absolute power in the name of defending the interests of ordinary people. They conveniently convinced themselves that democratic principles and procedures are incapable of promoting the interests of working people. To say that the cause of the working masses necessitates absolute power is to surpass by far the power that Haile Selassie wielded. In effect, in addition to subordinating all social and economic activities to the unfettered control of the state, socialism allowed indiscriminate repression of whatever stepped outside the norms that the Derg established. As we said, the downside of all this is undoubtedly economic stagnation, which does no more than aggravate elite conflicts over scarce resources. What caused the stagnation was not so much the need to restrict the reach of modernization so as to protect a traditional ruling class from threatening social demands, as was the case with Haile Selassie, but the resolution to create a socioeconomic system absolutely controlled by those who hold power. The nationalization of almost everything in Ethiopia and the establishment of a sprawling system of stratified neighborhood supervision (*kebele*) constituted the apex of political stronghold. Whereas revolutions in Europe strived to enlarge freedom and opportunities for growth because they supported the interests of emerging new classes, like the bourgeoisie, the Ethiopian Revolution took the direction of blocking freedom and opportunities to aspiring new elites.

The intransigence of the Derg, particularly of Mengistu, on the question of absolute power blew whatever potential socialism had for socioeconomic development. One of the major outcomes of the mania of absolute power was the prolonged, bloody, and costly war against insurgents, notably in the northern regions of Tigray and Eritrea. Even fully supported by the military assistance of the Soviet Union, the prolonged war drained all the resources of the country, with the consequence that Ethiopia slid downward into increasing poverty. The slide brought about the proliferation, at all levels, of activities and behaviors unfriendly to economic development, such as corruption, black marketeering, and cronyism. Moreover, the political alignment of Ethiopia with the Soviet Union significantly reduced Western economic assistance. Caught between the choice of hanging on to absolute power or compromising and accepting to share power, Mengistu stubbornly refused to take the path of reforms to safeguard his personal stronghold on power. He used all the repressive powers, including summary executions, to eliminate all those considered as opponents. His boundless cruelty did not even spare his close associates whose only fault was that they counseled reforms to reverse the downward slide. As mentioned earlier, his obsession with absolute power ultimately led to his final fall following a series of decisive defeats of the Ethiopian army at the hands of northern insurgents.

In sum, in ascribing all the shortcomings that derailed Ethiopia's modernization to the espousal and implementation of a radical socialist policy as well as to the unfitness, as established by the original Marxism, of the prevailing objective and politico-cultural conditions to a socialist

policy, we are simply underlining the inseparable link between modernization and freedom. Whether we take the free market or democracy, both aspects require the institutionalization of freedom. Here, one may ask, what about the cases of some undemocratic governments, for instance China, which achieved rapid, sustainable, and all-round economic growth to the point of becoming a competing superpower to the United States? I answer that such cases are not so much a rebuttal as a reminder that human history always works with particularities. It is in the realm of the possible that a goal can be realized by sidelining one attribute in favor of a compensatory component. Biological evolution provides countless examples of such a possibility: for instance, whereas fishes developed gills to breathe in water, terrestrial animals engaged in the alternative path of growing lungs to breathe in a different environment, namely, air. What is said here is just a reminder of the theory of diverse roads to modernization developed in the first chapter of this book, especially of the modernizing potential of cultural peculiarities. Thus, in terms of achieving economic results, an enlightened, determined, and nationalist authoritarianism, like the one in China, can serve as a substitute for the suspension of freedom, all the more efficiently if tradition sanctions it. Speaking of the potential for higher economic growth of the Confucian ethic, Herman Kahn identifies two driving features, namely, “the creation of dedicated, motivated, responsible, and educated individuals and the enhanced sense of commitment, organizational identity, and loyalty to various institutions.”²⁴ The method of deactivating, turning off one component to give the whole space to the other component can score remarkable results, for instance fast and impressive economic growth. However, the achievement remains one-sided so that the other part “is on the watch unceasingly for its own turn to come.”²⁵ That is why the Chinese success appears incomplete and in wait for the release and advancement of the complementary component, to wit, freedom.

Contrast the Chinese case with the democratization of East Asian countries, as in the cases of South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Though all started their economic modernization with the authoritarian model of a developmental state, which is premised on the strong involvement of the state in the planning, regulation, and funding of economic growth, they were able to develop progressively the other component of modernization, that is, democracy. As Francis Fukuyama writes, these countries “have all had highly competent developmental states that pursued ambitious industrial policies during their high-growth phases, and only later added the rule of law and democratic institutions to serve as checks on executive power.”²⁶ But when, as is the case of Ethiopia, the one-sided development does not even take place, then it means that a whole different situation fraught with harmful consequences is in the making.

After the fall of the Derg, the expectation was that the excess and failures of radical policy would persuade Ethiopians to appreciate moderation and resume the path of reform and evolutionary process. In effect, the conversion to the necessity of reformism through the adoption of a moderate and realistic policy became a widely shared belief. A large number of educated people, in line with the global disenchantment with the ideology of radical socialism, following the collapse of the Soviet camp, freed themselves from the spell of Leninism and condemned the revolutionary option as a disastrous mistake. This return to a reformist ideology would have been the right policy for post-revolutionary Ethiopia, were it not for the exclusory struggle for power unleashed by the ethnonationalist forces that overthrew the Derg, with the consequence that a new oppressive and disquieting regime was again imposed on Ethiopians.

¹ For an extensive study of the controversy, see Chapter 11 in Messay Kebede, *Ideology and Elite Conflicts: Autopsy of the Ethiopian Revolution* (New York: Lexington Books, 2011).

-
- ² See Zenebe Feleke, *Neber* (Addis Ababa, 1996, Ethiopian Calendar), 29.
- ³ Pliny the Middle-Aged, "The PMAC: Origins and Structure," *Northeast African Studies* 1, no.1 (1979): 1.
- ⁴ Bereket Habte Selassie, "The Dergue's Dilemma: The Legacies of a Feudal Empire," *Monthly Review* 32, no. 3 (July-August 1980):12.
- ⁵ Fred Halliday and Maxine Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution* (London: Verso Editions and NLB, 1981), 99.
- ⁶ John Cartwright, *Political Leadership in Africa* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 273.
- ⁷ Marina Ottaway, "Social Classes and Corporate Interests in the Ethiopian Revolution," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 14, no.3 (September 1976): 480.
- ⁸ Yohannis Abate, "The Legacy of Imperial Rule: Military Intervention and the Struggle for Leadership in Ethiopia 1974-1978," *Middle Eastern Studies* 13 (1983): 35.
- ⁹ Jerrold M. Post, "Current Concepts of the Narcissistic Personality: Implications for Political Psychology," *Political Psychology* 14, no. 1 (March 1993):100.
- ¹⁰ S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman, "The Radical Personality: Social Psychological Correlates of New Left Ideology," *Political Behavior* 4, no. 3 (1982)": 231.
- ¹¹ Forrest D. Colburn, *The Vogue of Revolution in Poor Countries* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 10.
- ¹² Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 85.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Forrest D. Colburn, *The Vogue of Revolution in Poor Countries*, 7.
- ¹⁵ Jeff Goodwin, *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945-1991* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Allan Todd, *Revolutions, 1789-1917* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Peter Schwab, *Ethiopia: Politics, Economics, and Society* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. 1985), xi.
- ²⁰ Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001), 229.
- ²¹ John W. Harbeson, *The Ethiopian Transformation: The Quest for the Post-Imperial State* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 10.
- ²² Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 2020), 15.
- ²³ Friedrich Engels, "Letters on Historical Materialism," *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings in Politics and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 408.
- ²⁴ Herman Kahn, *World Development: 1979 and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 122.
- ²⁵ Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1935), 257. For a lengthy discussion of Bergson's view, see the last chapter in Messay Kebede, *Bergson's Philosophy of Self-Overcoming; Thinking without Negativity or Time as Striving* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019),
- ²⁶ Francis Fukuyama, "The Patterns of History" *Journal of Democracy* 23, no.1 (January 2012): 23.