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SAMUEL ANDREAS ADMASIE

**Official Marxism and Socialist Development in Ethiopia:  
Rhetoric and Reality**

*ABSTRACT* In the aftermath of the 1974 Ethiopian revolution, the government came to adopt an official strand of Marxism that featured a number of characteristics inherited from the late Soviet interpretation of its own experience, and a number of instrumentalist contortions corresponding to the interest of the emergent dominant strata. This generated contradictions between the emancipatory ideational categories employed and the social-material characteristics of the actual process of attempted development. Nowhere were these contradictions greater than in the manufacturing sector, where exhortations and demands for sacrifice on the part of the working class were only matched by the – increasingly farcical – rhetorical place of prominence of that class. By focussing on the rhetorical aims, the practical means, and the achievements recorded in this sector, this article aims to analyse the concrete manner in which these contradictions manifested themselves. The findings indicate that the effort to construct and develop a socialist economy – narrowly defined as such in terms of the judicial form of ownership – failed on a number of levels. This failure is traced back to the nature of power relations in ‘Socialist Ethiopia’, and draws attention to the manner in which the ideology of ‘state socialism’, which shifts attention from the aim of revolutionising productive relations to the development of productive forces under state ownership, has generally been used to legitimise the rule of bureaucratic categories and to conceal exploitative relations prevailing under such rule. In this, the article draws on Marxist theorisation and critique of that ideology.

*KEYWORDS* socialist development, class relations, state socialism, manufacturing, surpluses

The transition to socialism encompasses a cluster of problems related to the transformation of relations of production and expansion of productive forces. During ‘the short twentieth century’ these problems were grappled with by militants and scholars across the world. Sparked by the October revolution and the subsequent effort to construct an industrial socialist economy in the USSR, its experiences became the basis of the understanding of Marxists in a range of economies that set out to emulate – and/or transcend – the Soviet experience in the second half of the century. Everywhere socialist development and industrialisation was attempted, however, it was shaped by underlying and local social and material factors as much as by universal ideational categories. This too was the case in Ethiopia, as it proclaimed its embarkation on a socialist path of development in the aftermath of the 1974 revolution. However, the contradictions between the ideational categories employed and the social-material basis for the pursuit of rapid development here were probably greater than in many cases. The absence of a revolutionary party, the unreformed nature of the imperial state, and the imposition on top of that state of a military body, constituted factors that combined with a poor subsistence based agrarian economy to shape the characteristics of the project and to generate contradictions between the highly ambitious rhetoric and the real conditions. The contradictions between the ideational categories employed and the social-material characteristics of the actual process of attempted development expressed themselves intensively in the manufacturing sector. Here, the means and the ends of the state clashed directly with its rhetoric, and the outcomes diverged sharply from the aims. Focusing on the efforts at engendering socialist development within this sector, means, ends and outcomes are explained in terms of the nature of prevalent power relations. Building on a Marxist critique of the ideology of ‘state socialism’, the centrality of the revolutionising of productive relations in the transition to socialism is highlighted.

### **I. Marxism in Ethiopia: conditions of emergence**

By the time Marxist literature begun to be engaged with in earnest in Ethiopia – in the 1960s – capitalist relations of productions had only began

to emerge, the working class was miniscule, and the overwhelming majority of the population consisted of peasant subsistence producers. While class divisions were sharp and rigid, they were not dynamic, and the absence of a sizeable proletariat was largely matched by the absence of a bourgeoisie proper. The ruling class of landlords was clearly satisfied in consuming what surplus it could pump out of the destitute peasantry, or reinvest it outside of the productive sectors, while foreign ownership was relied upon to drive the emerging industrial sector (Dessalegn 2009; Gebru 1995). A low-wage plantation economy complemented these sectors and provided the economy with some level of dynamism through the 1960s, but with high social costs attached to it. However, what expansion had taken place in the urban sectors was by the early 1970s grinding to a halt, as the structural limits of the miniscule home market were imposing themselves, and as the only major product for which external markets could offset the absence of a dynamic internal one was coffee. In the early 1970s the agrarian economy, starved of investments but with a growing population reliant on the land base, was to enter a crisis too, as illustrated by the 1973 famine. Commercial farming and plantations accelerated the development of landlessness. The socio-economic structure inherited was thus one that was equally incapable of satisfying the needs of the population, as it was of generating the surpluses required for extended accumulation to proceed. To this state of things, it should be added that the project of national integration had made only limited progress. Ethiopia, in the 1960s, remained an imperial mismatch of disjointed regions, and dominant and subordinated nationalities. It was probably mainly due to these factors that the burden of agency in introducing Marxism in Ethiopia fell on the students, who took up the task with great enthusiasm in the second half of the 1960s (Bahru 2010, 2014). As the medium imprints itself on the message, so did the nature of the agents in bringing Marxism to Ethiopia shape the manner in which it was understood and in which it evolved. First, and probably most importantly, it has been noted that “the formation of the Ethiopian Marxist intellectual [was] pushed to exhibit a certain ‘practical’ bent” (Ethiopian Marxist Review 1980: 4), meaning that pertinent theoretical conundrums had sometimes been left undealt with. Second, and relatedly, that Ethiopian Marxist intellectual generally came to exhibit a marked streak of ideological eclecticism. Radical literature would combine

aspects of late Soviet thinking with references to New Left thinkers, and to Chinese anti-revisionist writing, without much concern for the sharp contradictions between them. Right from the outset, a curious ambivalence thus came to characterise Ethiopian Marxism. Third, the ideological eclecticism allowed for the subversion of central aims. “Marxism in Ethiopia”, according to Teshale Tibebu (2008: 362), “was instrumentalist Marxism”. Marxism was used as a claim to legitimacy for ambitious categories including, initially, the intelligentsia, but later on also soldiers and the bureaucracy. With regards to proponents of different, contradictory, but essentially bourgeois nationalist projects, for example, Marxism was used both to couch arguments of secessionist and regionalist movements and of proponents of centralising and assimilating projects. Finally, the process of establishing Marxist political organisations was characterised by fissure and mutual hostility. These were all traits that would mark the history of Marxism in Ethiopia.

## **2. Official Marxism in Ethiopia: adoption and adaptation**

The specific political conjuncture in which official Ethiopian Marxism was adopted was a complex one. The Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) – an ad-hoc committee of junior officers and privates elected by their respective units – seized power by decree on September 12, 1974, following a seven-month long popular upsurge against the imperial regime. It immediately curtailed democratic rights, and established its autonomy from both the popular movement and the military units which had elected it. Its initial pronouncements and decrees contained nothing suggesting that the regime was anything but the most typical nationalist junta. The Marxist left in Ethiopia was less than impressed with the manner in which the PMAC had inserted itself at the apex of what it perceived to be the beginning of a revolutionary process (Markakis/Nega 1978). This left now contained a number of political nodes, and its ideas asserted influence in the trade unions and the teachers’ association – constituting what organised popular civil society that existed. Together, these groups vociferously opposed the PMAC’s alleged usurpation of the revolution, and its authoritarian inclination. The December 1974 declara-

tion of commitment to a vague 'Ethiopian socialism' did little to alter this attitude, and it became the object of scorn of the underground leftist press (Democracia 1975). The PMAC was in dire and obvious need of social and political support, and in an environment wherein Marxism had gained primacy, it attempted to acquire this by veering to the left.

The process by which Marxism became official state ideology proceeded through a number of popular reforms – such as those nationalising land and major industrial and financial enterprises – and a number of purges of variously inclined factions within the PMAC. But it was with the adoption of the Programme of the National Democratic Revolution in 1976 (PMGE 1978) – drafted by members of a Marxist-Leninist civilian organisation – that 'scientific socialism' was adopted as official state ideology. The document is a curious mixture of categories from Mao's theory of New Democracy and the Soviet version of the non-capitalist path of development<sup>1</sup>, but where the concepts used indicates greater inspiration from the former than the latter. Yet, in the absence of a proletarian vanguard party, it lacks the element of proletarian agency crucial to the theory of New Democracy, and instead constitutes a subjectless programme written entirely in the passive voice: what is to be done is made clear, but not who is to do it. This gaping hole – the absence of a party – would constitute a problem for the PMAC's effort to gain legitimacy through Marxist-Leninist rhetoric. It first tried to resolve this by creating a united front consisting of several minor Marxist-Leninist groups in 1977, all the while repressing the largest Marxist party – the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). However, this structure was not to prove sufficiently malleable, so the PMAC proceeded to abolish the front, purge the last affiliated groups and in its place, in 1979, form a pre-party organisation around the personal figure of its chairman. This is the organisation that in 1984 would graduate into the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) – a party of privileged soldiers, sycophants, and bureaucrats<sup>2</sup>.

The Marxism espoused by the WPE and the Ethiopian state replaced the eclecticism inherited from the student movement's Marxism with a dogmatic adherence to a sterile and mechanically applied version of late Soviet orthodoxy – complete with recurrent references to the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Mongolia, the non-capitalist path to development and revolutionary democracy (Mengistu 1984). Even the universities banned

the diffusion of ideas incommensurate with “scientific truths, findings and methodologies of research already accumulated in accordance with Marxism-Leninism” (Clapham 1990: 97). Gone now were the references to New Left theorists, who were instead treated with open contempt in the pages of the WPE’s official journal *Meskerem* (1982). These were replaced with adulations of states practicing “real existing socialism”, following the Soviet “torch bearer”. It was in this camp that the WPE considered itself “a component part” (Meskerem 1983d: 20-21; Meskerem 1983c: 41; Mengistu 1982: 9). The decisive shift in this direction came with the massive donation of Soviet military aid to stave off the Somali invasion in 1977. This conjuncture also marked the purge of the last civilian organisations within the united front; the concomitant end of anti-bureaucratic rhetoric; and the consummation of the hitherto somewhat selective violence into a general campaign of indiscriminate violence against the entire radical left. The adoption of this particular strand of Marxism was, then, a response to events, as instrumental in nature as that of the original adoption of a radical leftist programme. The dogmas and the contortions of Marxism which were upheld reflected this instrumentality too: the notion of the “monolithic party” (Meskerem 1983a: n.p.) which put to rest any notion of legitimate dissent; the economic theory of the primacy of productive forces which replaces the class struggle with a corporatist national project of developing production as the means by which to ‘achieve’ socialism; the concomitant conflation of state ownership with socialist relations of production which aligned with the militaristic fetishisation of the state; the chauvinistic attitude to the national question and the equally militaristic fetishisation of the national territory; and, as mentioned in the above, the contortions of an agency-less programme of revolution, that masked the real agent of transformation: the state, essentially unreformed, but placed under the domination of a military-bureaucratic category. All these dogmas and instrumentalist contortions were subordinated to a rhetorical acknowledgement of the workers as a leading force. So, for instance, could Mengistu (1984: 33) speak of “the leadership and supremacy of the working class”, and so would the WPE go to extraordinary length to recategorise bureaucratic elements as “workers” to have this nominal category cover a notable percentage of party members (Andargachew 1993: 256).

### 3. 'Socialist' development and manufacturing

Socialist Ethiopia – the formal name of the state ruled by the PMAC and WPE until the 1987 establishment of a People's Democratic Republic – embarked on a course of socialist development from a very primitive material base. The political economic context was one of widespread material scarcity and underdevelopment – as testified to by the 1973 famine that preceded the revolution – in which subsistence agriculture provided the mainstay of economic activities. The manufacturing sector, too, was weakly developed, employing only some 60,000 people and contributing only just below ten percent of GDP (Eshetu 2004: 156). Rapid development was indeed urgently required to begin to meet the material needs of the people. This much was acknowledged by the regime, which vowed to reverse the trajectory by promoting economic recovery in the aftermath of the first turbulent post-revolutionary years, embark upon a course of rapid economic growth, and thereby establish the foundation for the transition to socialism.

If on a general political level the Ethiopian regime sought political legitimisation through its relation to the experience of the USSR and the 'socialist camp' spearheaded by the latter, in terms of socialist economic construction, the experience of the USSR and its camp loomed equally large. In fact, the official Ethiopian conceptualisation of the problem of the transition to socialism and socialist development was taken root and branch from the contemporaneous Soviet and Eastern European interpretation of their own historical experience, with the central ingredients of a state-centred regime of accumulation, state ownership of major enterprises, central planning, and an overriding commitment to developing industry under a despotic factory regime. On a fundamental level this came to mean that the Ethiopian model for socialist transition also rested heavily on what Charles Bettelheim called economism (1976). This economism included the mechanistic identification of legal forms of ownership with class relations, and the thesis of the primacy of the development of the productive forces.

According to Charles Bettelheim (1976), the former position was laid down by Stalin in his report on the draft constitution of the USSR in 1936. In this report it was argued that the elimination of private ownership of the

means of production had eliminated all exploiting classes and hence the basis for any class contradictions. The thesis of the primacy of the productive forces, meanwhile, was introduced by Stalin in a 1938 essay where the development of the productive forces was presented “as the ‘driving force of history’” (Bettelheim 1976: 23). In doing so, it was thus set forth that the development of the productive forces was prior to revolutionising the relations of production, with the latter only changing in response to the development of the former in a mechanical manner: “First the productive forces of society change and develop, and then, *depending* on these changes and *in conformity with them*, men’s relations of production, their economic relations, change” (Stalin 1939: 121-122). Combined, these two theses contributed to an understanding of socialist transition that played down the importance of revolutionising the relations of production and that meant little more than the pursuit of the rapid development of nationalised/collectivised productive forces. Such efforts were buttressed by “workerism”, which fetishised “certain pretend qualities of [individual] workers” such as discipline and self-sacrifice and functioned as “a means of repression” (Bettelheim/Chavance 1981: 44). The exhortations for labour discipline and sacrifice – “labour discipline is the cornerstone for the triumph of our struggle to build a new order”, WPE Chairman Mengistu Hailemariam (1982: 54) claimed – become intelligible only in this context.

In official Ethiopian accounts too, socialist relations of production were simply equated with the judicial form of state ownership. “Basically”, *Mesk-erem* (1983b: 19) states, “the means of production could be owned communally by all members of a society or only by a few individuals. The system of ownership also determines the form of the relations of production. Hence, in societies where there is social ownership of the means of production, the relations among people are based on equality and mutual cooperation”. This legalistic understanding means that the expansion of socialist relations of production – an ubiquitously professed goal – essentially was reduced to further nationalisations: “the nationalization of key means of production [...] have freed workers from exploitation and at the same time created the preconditions for the construction of a socialist economy”, as stated in the WPE’s Ten-Year Prospective Plan (PMGSE 1984: 9). Here it is not only apparent that exploitation is conceived as incommensurate with state ownership – just as exploitation was decreed to have been “abolished”

in the 1936 USSR constitution – but furthermore that state ownership is considered the sole precondition for constructing a socialist economy. In fact, in the very same paragraph as the one cited above, state ownership is referred to as “socialist ownership”, and its establishment alone is considered sufficient to describe prevailing relations of production as “socialist” (PMGSE 1984: 9). With, therefore, the full nationalisation of industrial manufacturing, this sector was thought to have been brought in its entirety under socialist relations of production, and the goal of continued “expansion and strengthening of socialist production relations” referred only to bringing other sectors under state and collective ownership (PMGSE 1984: 32). In Ethiopia too, the continued prevalence of class relationships was played down and substituted for by the recurrent invocation of the vague category of “broad masses” (Clapham 1990: 98). But exploitation, “in the Marxian sense that those who do the work do not control their surplus product” (Sweezy 1981: 95), and the concomitant continued prevalence of class relationships is of course entirely compatible with state ownership. “Changes in legal forms of ownership”, according to Bettelheim (1976: 21), “do not suffice to cause the conditions for the existence of classes”, but the existence of such classes are rooted “not in legal forms of ownership but in production relations, that is, in the form of the social process of appropriation”.

The central place of industrial manufacturing in development, and the high ambitions for the sector, was another key ingredient inherited from ideological peers. Despite its infancy, industry was considered the leading sector (PMGSE 1984: 20) and of paramount importance to the larger political project: “it is only with industrialisation that a strong and free economy can be built”, Mengistu (1984: 33) stated. Because of the key status assigned to the manufacturing sector, it was also one of the first to be hit by large-scale nationalisations, beginning already in the first year of the revolution. Nationalised enterprises were managed by “the inherited bureaucracy” (Gebru 1995: 233) – save its former top layer – which was now reinforced in number, power and status. By 1984, no less than 95 percent of the manufacturing sector was under state ownership (PMGSE 1984: 63). In the Ten-Year Prospective plan launched in that year – one that was never to be completed – the ambitious developmental goals of socialist construction were spelled out. It was industry that was to serve “as the motive power

for achieving rapid economic development” and the sector was assigned planned investment funds that nearly tripled those assigned to the peasant agricultural sector (PMGSE 1984). It was assumed that this would lead to an annual growth rate of 12.1 percent, more than tripling the total value of output over the span of the plan (PMGSE 1984: 67), an ambitious goal considering the fact that industrial output over the previous 10 years had been stagnant at best.

Surpluses would urgently be needed to finance massive investments of up to 32 billion birr, in order to invigorate the economy. Incidentally and ironically, the land reform which had relaxed surplus extraction from the peasant agrarian sector meant that an increasing share of such surpluses would have to be extracted from other sectors. To be sure, agrarian surplus extraction was to continue. After the 1978 establishment of the Agricultural Marketing Corporation, the requisitioning of quotas of peasant produce for below market prices and control of external trade created an institutional framework for agrarian surplus extraction strikingly similar to Preobrazhensky’s primitive socialist accumulation<sup>3</sup> (Eshetu 2004: 135-146; Dessalegn 2009). Nevertheless, surplus extraction from the peasant sector had diminished considerably (Dessalegn 2009: 335-336), and the “extreme backwardness” (Gebru 1995: 127) of the sector had put limits on what was achievable in the first place. Because of the scarcity of domestic sources of surpluses, over half of the capital required was planned to originate from foreign sources. Nevertheless, industrial surpluses would also have to be mobilised at an increasingly rapid pace. Out of the massive investments outlined in the 1984 Ten Year Perspective Plan – deemed “extraordinarily unlikely” to be obtained by contemporaneous observers (Clapham 1990: 117) – 27 percent was projected to come out of public enterprises, putting a heavy pressure on these (PMGSE 1984: 25). The WPE (1984a: 71-72) Programme stated that “since the effort to boost domestic accumulation in the current context is largely a question of increasing the state budget [and] since the major sources of accumulation are the production, distribution and service enterprises under state control, appropriate measures will be taken to raise ... their profitability”. WPE (1984b: 113-114) economic guidelines furthermore established the aim to “double the rate of capital accumulation”, through, among other things, “reductions in costs and increases in productivity of public enterprises”. In the manufacturing sector, profit-

ability had generally been achieved, but greater profitability was required to meet the targets (PMGSE 1984: 64).

Logically, this put increasing pressure on incomes and on working hours required. Indeed, the significance of contributions to be requisitioned in cash and in kind “cannot be underestimated”, and included the surrendering of wages as well as the unpaid partaking in labour intensive investment projects (PMGSE 194: 26). Demands such as these also placed pressure on the collective rights of workers, and the labour and trade union laws of 1975 and 1982 did little to enhance such rights. The legal regime created was one in which trade unions were explicitly centralised, where lower trade union bodies were obliged “to accept and implement the decisions of higher[bodies]” (PMGE 1975), where striking was practically impossible, and where absence from work could be treated as a criminal offence. It is not without rationale that the 1975 labour proclamation was called “a proclamation of slavery” by the radical left (Kiflu 1998: 19). In this regard it is important to note how, because of the assumption of the abolishment of exploitation and class contradictions within the state owned sector, “the resistance of workers and peasants are not apprehended as such [but] appear to the dominant fraction of the state bourgeoisie as the work of ‘bad elements’ [...] who engage in sabotage activities or plots [...]. These individuals, even when they belong to the most exploited strata, are thus called ‘enemies of the people’; and are punished as such” (Bettelheim/Chavance 1981: 44). It is in this context that Mengistu’s (1982: 31-32) condemnation of labour unrest and opposition as the work of “infiltrating agents” and “braggarts” whose “incitement” of workers had caused “horri-fying damage” becomes understandable. It is also in this context that the post-revolutionary repression that the Ethiopian labour movement was subjected to must be understood<sup>4</sup>.

This brings us to the cotemporaneous Marxist movements’ critique of the model espoused by the state. As mentioned, Ethiopian Marxism came to being in such a conjuncture that in-depth analysis was never really prioritised. Nevertheless, it is clear from publications and pamphlets of oppositional Marxist movements that the outlines of another path to socialist transition were envisaged. The EPRP programme of 1975 promises to eliminate exploitation “no matter the source”, and guarantee the right to strike. It makes a distinction between formal state ownership and state owned

institutions “under the direct control of the people“, although it fails to elaborate how this direct control should be achieved (EPRP 1975: XI, II, 15). In its publication *Democracia* (1976), the critique of the “capitalist” way of operating the state-owned enterprises and their profit-centred administration was expounded upon. Similarly, the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions condemned, in its September 1975 Congress resolution – a congress held just before the organisation was banned and repressed – not only the authoritarianism of the government, which denied basic democratic and collective rights to the popular masses, but the “subordination of the national economy to the control of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie” (CELU 1975: 1-2). The CELU (1975: 14) resolution critiqued the continuation of exploitative relations and the manner in which state-owned enterprises were run, and demanded that the management be appointed by the workers. The Ethiopian Student Movement in North America concurred, in a congress resolution where it “emphatically rejects the noxious theories of the junta which equates nationalizations with socializations, state ownership with public ownership, state-capitalism with socialism and militarization of unions with workers’ control” (ESUNA 1975: 72). The critique of the radical left was indeed very similar to that directed by Bettelheim against the “state capitalism” of the late Soviet Union.

#### **4. The fruits of ‘socialist’ development**

How then did the WPE’s attempt at socialist transition play out, and how did its industrial plans fare? It is not too far-fetched to state that it was an emphatic failure whichever level is looked at.

First, the WPE’s ambitions to intensify accumulation and investment, and to boost the output and profitability of the industrial sector was nowhere near achieved. The planned surpluses could not be raised to the level of the plans, and what was extracted was largely spent on the war effort and the swollen bureaucracy – in which “auspicious conditions were created for an indolent and corrupt ‘bureaucratic bourgeois class’ to emerge” (Gebru 1995: 234). Rather than boosting savings, they dropped to less than a third of what they were before the revolution (Eshetu 2004: 108). Limits to financing were also imposed by the absence of the devel-

opment of new exporting sectors, where coffee continued to constitute the lifeline. Those investments which were nevertheless conducted resulted in a pile-up of national debt. In the final year of WPE rule, debt service covered almost exactly the value of merchandise exports (Eshetu 2004: 110), revealing a bureaucratically bloated but – politically and economically – bankrupt state. Yet, such investments were still not sufficient to reinvigorate the economy. By the time the WPE was overthrown in 1991, the official GDP per capita was significantly lower than before the revolution (Eshetu 2004: 104). In terms of manufacturing output, it had grown at a sluggish pace of around four percent at best (Eshetu 2004: 107), or, at worst even declined (Alemayehu 2011: 85). Despite the poor overall performance of the economy, manufacturing declined as a share of GDP. From contributing around ten percent of GDP at the eve of the revolution, that share had diminished to eight percent in 1990 (EEA/EEPRI: 2005). Moreover, the state-owned industrial enterprises were in a state of decline and in a serious crisis of profitability. This is something that was recognised by WPE policy makers, who tried a number of measures – including introducing incentive systems such as the piece-rate pay, setting up control commissions, and reintroducing mixed forms of ownership, all more or less in vain – to revive the sector (Office of the Wage Board 1985; National Workers' Control Committee 1986).

Second, in terms of the position of the working class – the rhetorical leading force of the socialism the WPE was building – its conditions deteriorated markedly. In the exposition above some points have already been made about the repression of the labour movement in the aftermath of the revolution, the abolishment of the trade union confederation and its replacement with regimentalised structures, as well as the harsh legal regime which was introduced. This emasculation of the labour movement – combined with the heightened surplus requirements – was to result in the collapse of wages. Between the revolution and the fall of the WPE, real manufacturing wages lost over half their value<sup>5</sup>. Surplus requirements, furthermore, meant that workers were compelled to surrender, as contributions, both part of what wages remained, and additional unpaid requisitioned labour (PMGSE 1984: 26). To add insult to injury, workers were forcefully drafted into militias or armed force units sent to the different war fronts, providing low paid military labour, not infrequently at the

cost of lives. It is not only, then, that workers had not been freed from exploitation, as pronounced in official rhetoric, but far worse, that exploitation had actually been radically intensified. Making matter worse, the workers had been disarmed of their organisational assets and what they had achieved in terms of collective rights. The mass retrenchments and the further decline of wages that followed in the wake of the overthrow of WPE was, to a certain extent, conditioned by the political emasculation of the working class in the prior period, and indicated to what extent it had been weakened<sup>6</sup>.

Third, the projected transition to a socialist economy – even if the minimum formalistic and legalistic conceptualisation of the WPE is accepted: namely, that state ownership equals socialism – was a massive failure. The simple and uncontested manner in which the rolling back of state ownership – heralded by WPE as hard-fought ‘victories’ – was conducted in the aftermath of WPE’s collapse indicates the superficial depth of prior transformations. “Socialist production relations can be said to have a solid and lasting foundation only if rates of capital accumulation that will enable the system to maintain sustained levels of development are generated”, the WPE (1984b: III) economic guidelines state. While this statement completely ignores the social and political basis for such relations, it is nevertheless true that the inability to generate such development was one factor that led to the collapse of WPE socialism.

Finally, and on an ideational level, the experience of WPE socialism led to the discrediting of Marxism. Across the board, and over a few years in the 1980s and early 1990s, all self-proclaimed Marxist movements – including the WPE, which was in the process of changing its name to the Democratic Unity Party of Ethiopia as it was toppled – distanced themselves from Marxism. While it could be argued that the agricultural-development led industrialisation espoused by the post-WPE government reflected a switch from a Preobrazhensky-inspired to a Bukharin-inspired approach<sup>7</sup> to development, and thus the continued reverberation of categories inherited from the Soviet experience, and while the Leninist-sounding rhetoric of revolutionary democracy continued to be used for some time, this certainly was not to have any Leninist meaning. The nadir of the fortunes of Marxism in Ethiopia can be illustrated by the moment when the head of Ethiopia’s post-WPE government declared that the agenda of

his formerly Marxist-Leninist party was now “white capitalism” (Assefa 2015: 105). “Marxism in Ethiopia”, Teshale Tibebe has written (2008: 349) “was episodic – that is, it came suddenly into the Ethiopian political scene; and it disappeared as suddenly as it appeared”.

## 5. Explaining the outcomes

Many plausible explanations for the failure of the WPE to achieve its plans can be, and have been, forwarded. On the most basic level, however, it is probably true that this failure is related to how the plans were conceived as much as how they were carried out. Drafted from above, with minimum participation from the working people who were to implement them and directly against their immediate interest, they were never likely to mobilise the support required to implement them. Unlike in the Soviet Union and several other societies under the sway of similar types of ‘state socialism’, in Ethiopia that project neither had the attributes of a working class project nor a national project, but that of an elite increasingly detached from its social environment. That what surpluses were still extracted were squandered on war and bureaucratic mismanagement only compounded this original problem.

However, a regime that operates in the name of the workers but simultaneously deprives them of collective and individual rights, exhorts them to work harder for less pay, while squandering the surpluses on an extended bureaucracy and enlarged war-making machine, requires some form of explication. Clearly, the rhetoric cannot be reconciled with reality. As discussed in the above, official Marxism in Ethiopia was instrumentalist. Speaking of the top cadre of the WPE, Clapham (1990:77) has assessed that “it could scarcely be described as Marxist-Leninist at all” and that “loyalty, rather than ideological commitment was, according to all reports, the principal criterion for its recruitment”. With regards to the Chairman of the WPE, Clapham (1990: 77) writes that “to speak of [Marxist] conviction [...] rather than [viewing Marxism] as an instrument for achieving nationalist and statist goals [...] I can see no sign”. This is all rather understandable. Central ingredients in late Soviet Marxism, such as state fetishism, crude economism, the conflation of state ownership with socialist relations

of production, and commandist developmentalism, fell well into what were the natural priorities and interests of the strata that exercised power within the WPE scaffolding. That the adoption of Marxist rhetoric helped to steal the thunder of the radical left only buttressed such instrumentalist concerns. But it was nevertheless significant that it was Marxism – even if a sterilised, contorted and instrumentalised version – that was adopted as official state ideology. It created tensions between the rhetoric of an emancipatory and universalist project, the prerogatives of rapid accumulation, and the high-handed bureaucratic inclinations of the rulers. When this came to result in a labour regime far harsher than that of pre-revolutionary times, it ridiculed the official rhetoric of working class leadership, but also shaped official rhetoric by forcing it to grapple with these contradictions. The deployment of workerism came in handy here. Nevertheless, this could not conceal the fact that the role of the workers was in practice relegated to providing legitimacy to the regime's socialist claims, in addition to generating surpluses. There were no institutional paths open – in the absence of a party representing the workers or any democratic mass organisation, and with hierarchical trade union structures subordinated to the regime – for the workers to play any role outside of this. This, in turn, and combined with the disastrous economic outcomes, could not fail to lead to the discrediting of Marxism in the popular imagination, and its, at least temporary, retreat. This is despite the fact that the contemporaneous Marxist critique that the Ethiopian radical left employed against the bureaucratic regime proved to be very prescient.

At the heart of the WPE's attempt to foster 'socialist development', then, lay a most fundamental contradiction: a popular revolution bringing to power a most commandist inclined military-bureaucratic category, and, partially as a result of this, the deployment of Marxist rhetoric to justify a regime of urgently intensified surplus extraction. The problem of agency – mystified as it was in official rhetoric – thus comes to the fore, as the question of what social force is to lead the project of socialist transformation begs an answer. That the means by which to resolve this contradiction was bolstered in rhetorical workerism only underlined and reinforced this contradiction. The Ethiopian experience serves to affirm the manner in which the ideology of 'state socialism' – expressed in the fetishisation of the state; the substitution of legal forms of ownership for the revolutionising

of productive relations; and the thesis of the primacy of the productive forces – has generally been the instrument by which Marxism is subverted to legitimise the rule of bureaucratic categories and conceal the exploitative relations it generates. It lends credence to the argument that it is the revolutionising of the relations of production and the abolishment of exploitation, rather than the development of the productive forces under the judicial ownership of the state, that constitutes the central problem of the transition to socialism.

- 1 A new ‘democratic’ revolution refers to that which carries out the anti-feudal and anti-colonial tasks historically associated with the bourgeois revolution, but, since the bourgeoisie is considered incapable of doing so, occurs under the leadership of the proletariat, represented by the proletarian party. The theory of ‘non-capitalist development’, on the other hand, does not refer to classed forces so much as the individual qualities and orientation of various leaders and fractions, who could style themselves as ‘revolutionary democrats’ and reject a capitalist path even under such conditions where socialist development was not yet considered plausible.
- 2 See Andargachew 1993: 255–264, Clapham 1990: 70–92 and Dawit 1990 for accounts describing the nature of this party, its composition (soldier and bureaucrats-dominated), its decision-making process (decisions handed down from the Chairman and enthusiastically endorsed with standing ovations by the concerned bodies), and mode of recruitment (based on personal loyalty to the Chairman and degree of sycophancy).
- 3 A strategy to build up industrial capital through the appropriation and transfer of agrarian surpluses, mediated by the state through the means of unequal exchange. Taxes and tariffs, price fixing and quotas are prime examples.
- 4 See Kiflu 1993, among others for a discussion on this repression.
- 5 This figure is based on the author’s own computation of manufacturing wages in the Statistical Abstracts from the Central Statistical Agency, deflated by the rate of the Consumer Price Index of Addis Ababa found in the same.
- 6 These are subjects which are analysed in detail in this author’s forthcoming doctoral dissertation.
- 7 Bukharin’s ‘organic’ approach favoured a relationship between agriculture and industry mediated by the market, allowing for accumulation to take place in both sectors simultaneously and interdependently, and for demand increasing in the former driving the development of the latter.

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*ABSTRACT* Nach der äthiopischen Revolution 1974 eignete sich die Regierung eine Variante des Marxismus an, die Charakteristika der späten sowjetischen Interpretation und eine Reihe von Verzerrungen zugunsten der herrschenden Schichten beinhaltet. Das brachte Widersprüche zwischen den emanzipatorischen ideellen Kategorien und den tatsächlichen sozio-materiellen Charakteristika des Entwicklungsversuchs hervor. Nirgends waren diese Widersprüche größer als im verarbeitenden Sektor. Der Arbeiterklasse wurde – zunehmend als Farce – rhetorisch ein zentraler Platz eingeräumt, gleichzeitig gab es Aufrufe und Forderungen an sie, sich für den Prozess aufzuopfern. Mit Blick auf die proklamierten Ziele, praktischen Mittel und Erfolge in diesem Sektor analysiert dieser Artikel, wie sich diese Widersprüche konkret manifestierten. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Anstrengungen, eine sozialistische Wirtschaft (eng definiert in rechtlichen Begriffen der Eigentümerschaft) aufzubauen, auf mehreren Ebenen scheiterten. Dieses Scheitern wird auf die spezifischen Machtverhältnisse im ‚sozialistischen Äthiopien‘ zurückgeführt. Es verweist darauf, wie die Ideologie des Staatssozialismus allgemein die Aufmerksamkeit von der Revolutionierung der Produktionsverhältnisse hin zur Entwicklung der Produktivkräfte im Staatseigentum verschiebt und dazu genutzt wird, Ausbeutungsbeziehungen unter Führung bürokratischer Gruppen zu legitimieren. Hierin bedient sich der Beitrag einer marxistischen Theoretisierung und Kritik dieser Ideologie.

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