

ETHIOPIAN PEASANTS AND DEVELOPMENT

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1. THE CONDITION OF ETHIOPIAN PEASANTS

What do we really mean by the Ethiopian peasants? This is a class people who form a large majority of the total population, 85 to 90%. They live by cultivating scattered small plots of land. About one-third of them have plots that are on the aggregate less than one-half of one hectare; two-thirds of them less than one hectare.

They often live in scattered huts that on the average have areas of less than twenty square metres, which serve the families as bedroom and kitchen. In these tiny and fragile huts whole families of peasants together with all the animals – chicken, sheep and goats, cows and oxen, and sometimes donkeys are packed. One can easily imagine the stench of animal refuse. In addition there are multitudes of lice, fleas, bugs that make the lives of Ethiopian peasants hard, precarious and short. The very high infant and child mortalities and prevalence of all kinds of preventable diseases is a direct consequence of the very poor level of living, and a lack of medical and educational facilities. You have a general idea of the misery under which Ethiopian peasants struggle to survive. They are truly a population at risk.

Ethiopian peasants have been suffering oppression and exploitation since time immemorial. For those adventurous enough to escape from the miserable condition into which they were born has always been to join the oppressors, and to become *neftegnas*, servants of the military aristocracy.¹ Forced by circumstances, they perpetuate the very condition they hated and escaped from. In other words, the oppressed are transformed into instruments of oppression. Even Fascist Italy recognized the potency of these instruments of military aristocracy and used it to subdue rebels in Libya and Somalia. That is how the institution of military aristocracy is passed from generation to generation. Surprisingly, and by queer Ethiopian logic the military aristocracy has outlived the institution of monarchy and continues to this day in its worst form.

Today all peasants are landless. As the professor of literature, Adam Smith, observed “A person who can acquire no property, can have no other interest but to eat as

¹ Negadras Ghebre Hiywet in his መንግሥትና የሕዝብ አስተዳደር 1916.

much, and to labour as little as possible.”² The fact is that the Ethiopian peasant, far from eating enough, starves for at least some months of the year. In the kind of situation where the fruits of one’s labour are easily robbed, Barrington Moore Jr’s remark that “an abysmally low standard of living and set of expectations is the only adjustment that makes sense”³ is more correct.

Moreover, every war, whether internal or external, has its toll in more ways than one on Ethiopian peasants. First and foremost, a considerable proportion of the able bodied young are willingly or unwillingly sought as cannon fodders. During the last thirty to forty years the frequency of famine has made it easier for those who recruit very young boys and girls driven from their homes by famine. It is interesting to observe that the reward for those who served the military aristocracy has always been land, a return to peasantry. One will find Ethiopian peasants who served Italians, Haile Sillasié’s regime, the Derg and now the Weyyane regime. Others will grow up to serve the next generation of military aristocracy. And so, the unchanging life of Ethiopians goes around and around in a circle.

It is, I think, reasonable to assume that the ultimate aspiration of the peasant is not to resist oppression but rather to join the oppressors and become a petty oppressor himself. One may easily project this reasoning to the Derg and the Weyyane who ostensibly set out to remove oppression but, instead, institutionalized it.⁴ The famous British historian, Arnold Toynbee, I think, in the early part of the 1950, first hypothesized the propagation of oppression by an oppressed group. He created a storm by giving Israel as an example. When one sees what is happening to the Palestinians today, one certainly cannot help agreeing with Toynbee. At any rate, it seems to me that Toynbee’s theory does hold true for Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian peasants are not only a constant source of cannon fodder. They are also the source of food for the multitudes who are not employed in any productive work and who, therefore, cannot buy but only pillage their food. In the old days, the followers of the military aristocracy were assigned a given number of peasants depending on their rank. From these peasants they extracted food and labour. Although the system was abused, it was supposed to be remuneration for the military aristocracy and taxation for the peasants. In addition, the clergy sometimes, and the students in the Church educational system always, depended on the peasants for their food.

² The Wealth of Nations, Everyman’s Library, I, London. 1960.

³ Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World, Boston, 1966.

⁴ I have attempted to expound this conception in an Amharic article published in Tobia.

Modernization of the state machinery did not bring any relief to the peasants. With the centralization of administration, the armed forces, and the police, taxation in kind was replaced by taxation in cash. At one time peasants were forced to pay land tax, agricultural income tax, education tax, and health tax. During the reign of the Derg peasants and their families were forced to pay fees for peasant associations, women's associations, youth associations, and for the Ethiopian Red Cross. The Weyyane regime in addition to the regular taxes and contributions has introduced involuntary seed and fertilizer purchases from its own business enterprises, which are made to prosper at the expense of the peasants.

The demand for cash from peasants has another exploitative side. Cash collectors of legal and illegal obligations arrive at harvest time when the peasants have their crops. Since the cash collectors do not give them any time for fear that peasants will squander harvested crops, all peasants are forced to take their produce to the market at about the same time. Prices for their crops drop abysmally. Consequently, they are forced to sell more of their crops in order to meet their cash obligations. This is the socioeconomic origin of famine. The twin forces of an irresponsible regime and the market snatch the produce of the peasants. The hallmark of the irresponsibility of successive regimes is that no attempt has been made to exempt poor peasants who hardly produce sufficient to meet their food requirements from taxation and the ubiquitous demands for contributions. Squeezing the peasants until they die by mass starvation has characterized all regimes in Ethiopia. This itself is very surprising. It is equally surprising that peasants always remain tranquil under the constant oppression and exploitation. Without external intervention and relief assistance the tragic state of Ethiopian peasants would have been worse than it has been so far.

2. WHAT ARE THE CAUSES FOR THE MISERY OF ETHIOPIAN PEASANTS?

The fact that successive regimes squeeze peasants unto death and the almost completely passive acceptance of their misery by peasants, I think, requires an explanation beyond those given traditionally. Perhaps, one explanation is the bonding that develops between the oppressor and the oppressed. Without going too far I suggest Erich Fromm's sadistic-masochistic theory that seems to establish the mutual need between the oppressor and the oppressed. Here is what From says: "*The sadist needs the person over whom he rules, he needs him very badly, since his own feeling of strength is rooted in the fact that he is the master over someone.*"⁵ He explains this absolute and unrestricted power over others by saying that it is "so as to make of

⁵ Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, New York, 1969.

them nothing but instruments, 'clay in the potter's hand'. The masochistic side is that people feel insignificant, powerless, and absolutely dependent on their tormentors. It may be worthwhile to point out here that in the history of famines that I have examined in Europe and Asia there has always been riots and looting, a fact that is conspicuously absent from Ethiopia.⁶ In fact, it will not be difficult to find empirical evidence to support Erich Fromm's theory of sadistic-masochistic bond.

Fromm's explanation of sadistic and masochistic bonding must be examined in relation to the very important fact that was mentioned earlier, namely, that Ethiopian peasants do not seem to react and protest to the oppressive and exploitative measures that are taken against them. Traditionally there was a mechanism for presenting (through **abetuta**) their complaints to the highest authority on the land. For the last thirty years, however, the **abetuta** mechanism has disappeared. One of the reasons for the cessation of **abetuta** may be that it is also essentially recognition of legitimacy. Nevertheless, Ethiopian peasants have not replaced **abetuta** in the last thirty years. We may either assume that peasants have been satisfied with their condition in the last thirty years, or examine Fromm's sadistic-masochistic bond between the tyrannical regimes and Ethiopian peasants.

One very important change (other than the so-called Land Reform) during the last thirty years is the emergence of the organization called peasant associations. If it were made functional, perhaps, it could be said that one of the best things that the Derg did to the Ethiopian peasants was the establishment of peasant associations. Peasants, who were hitherto disorganized, and lived and worked individually, were organized into peasant associations. Unfortunately, however, the objectives of peasant associations for the Derg were not the promotion of the interests of the peasants but those of the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE). Peasant associations became the potent instrument for the oppression and exploitation of peasants in the same way the urban **qebeles** were for urban dwellers. For some peasants, peasant associations became a modern version of joining the military aristocracy. The Weyyane inherited the technique from the Derg and made it worse by tightening its control over the peasants, by practically abolishing even the nominal national peasant association, and by claiming the peasants as its own and lead them to poverty and famine.

To this day in spite of their numbers Ethiopian peasants remain powerless and, therefore, voiceless. This has always been the norm for Ethiopian peasants as indicated earlier. Oppressed and exploited for generations, starved, degraded, and

⁶ For details see Mesfin Wolde-Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia: 1958-1976*, New Delhi, 1984, or paperback edition London, 1986.

dehumanized by every regime that has come to power, demoralized and resigned to their fate, Ethiopian peasants are in absolute despair. They are like caged animals that see no prospect of freedom, freedom that they neither have nor consider it value enough to struggle for. Hemmed in between the adverse forces of nature and the forces of oppression and exploitation, peasants are helpless, and not in control of their own lives. They are human without human will.

In this connection, it may be useful to note that researchers on Ethiopian peasants sometimes fail to grasp the fundamental problem. In 1983, some researchers asked peasants to suggest solutions for their living conditions. Of about twenty suggestions the peasants made only one, hard work, pertains to the peasants. All the remaining suggestions involve partial or total government action. The baffled researchers comment that it is "disquieting to find that the first recommended solution is to turn the problem over to the state."⁷ In the peasant world problems are expected to be resolved by those who have the power, and perhaps, also created them. There are two powers that can solve the problems of peasants: one is God, and the other is the state.

Responsibility comes only with freedom and choice. The peasant cannot be expected to accept the responsibility for his predicament, for his precarious existence. The twin forces of Heaven and Earth, above and beyond him, generate his precarious existence and all the problems that nag him daily. What Erich Fromm calls irrational authority that seeks power over people "*denies man's capacity to know what is good or bad; the norm giver is always an authority transcending the individual. Such a system is based not on reason and knowledge but on awe of the authority and on the subject's feeling of weakness and dependence.*"⁸

The famous English economic historian, R.H. Tawney, expresses more or less the same idea:

*...poverty is a symptom and a consequence of social disorder, while the disorder itself is something at once more fundamental and more incorrigible, and that quality in the social life which causes it to demoralize a few by excessive riches is also the quality which causes it to demoralize many by excessive poverty.*⁹

This will lead us to consider progress or development.

⁷ Yeraswork et al December 1983. Ethiopian Highland Reclamation Study, WP 4

⁸ Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics, New York, 1969.

⁹ R.H. Tawney, The Acquisitive Society, New York, 1948.

3. WHAT IS DEVELOPMENT, OR PROGRESS?

If there were a cemetery for development projects in Ethiopia, it would be a large one, and the epitaph for each one of them would read: HERE LIES XXX THAT GENEROUSLY BUT FOOLISHLY EXPENDED Y BILLIONS OF DOLLARS FOR A THANKLESS AND INCONSEQUENTIAL JOB. Some of the old graves will probably have names like CADU, ARDU, WADU, EPID, INTEGRATED RURAL DEVELOPMENT, etc., the newest one will be RCDP. The road to this cemetery, no doubt, is paved with good intention.

We should also, I think, pay homage to the numerous books that now gather dust on our shelves. There is no prominent economist in any prominent university who did not write a prescription for economic development. From my own shelf, I picked the following:

Charles P. Kindleberger, MIT, Economic Development, New York, 1958

Ansley J. Coale and Edgar M. Hoover, Population Growth and Economic Development in Low-Income Countries, Princeton, 1958

W.W. Rostow, The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto, MIT, Cambridge (Mass.), 1960.

Leafing through these old books and observing my own markers on them, it was not difficult to realize that these outstanding scholars believed that development could occur by following certain prescriptions mechanically. It is at least fifty years since outstanding economists started prescribing the medicine for our ailments. In another context, I have called such prescriptions veterinarian, because the veterinarian of necessity prescribes without the benefit of the patient's articulation of its ailment. The fact that we are still with our old economic malaise suggests that either the diagnosis of the economists is wrong; or that we really do not understand enough the prescriptions to apply them to our condition. This means that there is something fundamentally wrong with the prescriptions, or with us. What is not quantifiable is not calculable, and what is not calculable falls outside the realm of the economists. But our poverty, our ignorance, and our ill health are all quantifiable and calculable. The economists cannot go wrong there. Where they almost definitely went wrong is in mistaking the symptom of the malaise for the cause of the malaise.

Before I proceed, I want to raise a question. How is it that until recently economists failed to ask the simple question: what factors caused the interruption of the natural process of development in the non-western societies? In a very broad sense, the fundamental difference between western and non-western societies is not material-technological. The fundamental difference is in human values, dynamic and elevating

western values sharply in contrast with petrified and depressing values in most other countries. By ignoring these values economists believed they could bring about development by a mechanical process through prescriptions for the symptoms of underdevelopment.

The economists did not take into account what Jean Paul Sartre calls “the foundation of all values,” freedom. The famous economist and Nobel Prize winner, Amartya Sen, in his earlier writings on famine talked about entitlements. He was not comfortable with it. The problem was that his entitlements did not have any philosophical, moral, or political ground to stand on. I suspect he was trying to avoid being controversial. But he came out with a book, *Development as Freedom*. He could not overcome the economist in him to make the title *Freedom as Development*. I will quote only two very significant sentences from this book to demonstrate that Amartya Sen found the cause of our malaise. The first sentence reads: “***The ends and means of development call for placing the perspective of freedom at the center of the stage.***” Development, he says, is not a “ready-made delivery.” The second sentence I want to quote to you is: “famines do not occur in democracies.”

In a condition of freedom, man is both the end and the means of development. It is essentially the release of the energy in man that propels development. That human energy is released only under conditions of freedom and individual liberty. It is the suffocation of the mind that did not allow us “to invent invention,” to use David Landes’s phrase.

But to be fair to the economists, they did hint at other values. Rostow, for instance, states that “*preconditions for take-off required major changes in political and social structures and even in effective social values.*” Human progress in any aspect of living involves choices by the individual agent, and choices involve freedom. It is in freedom that the mind of the individual opens numerous vistas of opportunities for action. It is in freedom that the individual is energized to become creative and productive.

4. CONCLUSION

More than anything else, economic development is a function of the mind, and of the spirit of free individuals who think, create, invent, and cooperate for a common goal. Where the mind suffocates under oppression, and the spirit is paralyzed by fear man is only slightly better than lower animals, for he has not yet risen to his human potential. A long time ago, a philosopher-economist wrote:

(A) state that dwarfs its men [I am sure he includes women, because he was perhaps the first feminist], in order that they may be more docile instruments in its hands even for beneficial purposes, will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished, and that the perfection of the machinery to which it has sacrificed everything will in the end avail it nothing, for want of the vital power which, in order that the machine might function smoothly, it has preferred to banish.¹⁰

The dwarfing of 85 to 90% of the population of the country is taken as a development program. Through its land policy the present regime holds the Ethiopian peasants as political hostage, and in bondage. No one will argue that it is possible to modernize miniscule and fragmented peasant plots. No one will argue that keeping the proportion of the peasant population so large will ever bring about development. That the policy is anti-development is also demonstrated by the discouragement of foreign investment in agriculture. One company that wanted large area in the uninhabited semi-arid parts of the country was asked to pay exorbitant sums of money for the land; it had to quit. Such investments would have created secure seasonal and permanent jobs for thousands of pastoralists who now live precariously.

Let me end with the words of Jean Paul Sartre: "God, value and supreme end of transcendence, represents the permanent limit in terms of which man makes known to himself what he is. To be man means to reach toward being God."¹¹ Where that desire is absent development is mere talk.

It is a sad commentary on our condition and a confirmation of our infirmity and stagnation that more than thirty-one years ago I gave a talk in this very hall on Rural Ethiopia, more or less the same topic of today. The thrust of my talk then was that there was no government, which had public responsibility, but a private share company. Today whatever change has occurred is for the worse.

God, help us!

God, help Ethiopian peasants!

¹⁰ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government*, London, 1948.

¹¹ *Essays in Existentialism*, New York, 1993.