

# H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXII-3

**Elleni Centime Zeleke.** *Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964-2016*. Leiden: Brill, 2019. ISBN 978-90-04-41475-4 (hardback, €135.00).

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 INTRODUCTION BY ALDEN YOUNG, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES
 

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The relationship between the social sciences and Africa has long been fraught. A few years ago Mahmood Mamdani took up the question of whether or not there is an intellectual mode of reasoning that we can describe as African in an essay entitled “the African University.”<sup>1</sup> He posited that the social sciences in Africa have been caught between a universalizing tendency which he traced back to the colonial university or an orientation to the here and now in the service of the project of national development that he traces to the post-independence university. According to Mamdani both tendencies have proven inadequate to create an African mode of reasoning or a social science that is appropriate to the African context.

Tackling a similar question about the role and legacy of the social sciences in Africa, Elleni Centime Zeleke chooses a different approach. Rather than framing the development of the social sciences through the history of particular institutions of higher learning, she focuses on the thoughts and writings of the Ethiopian Student Movement, a transnational collection of Ethiopian post-secondary students studying at home, in Europe, and in North America between 1964 and 1974. A close reading of the journals and writings of these students provides the heart of this captivating and provocative book (1). Zeleke shows how the intellectual culture of the Student Movement and its debates have continued to reverberate throughout Ethiopia’s political culture until the present.

She pays particular attention in chapters four and five to the 2005 federal elections and the twenty-first century debates about redeveloping Ethiopia’s capital Addis Ababa in order to propel the developmental state. She writes of the Ethiopian Student Movement that, “if the virtue of the student movement from the 1960s and 1970s was that it attempted to theorize Ethiopia’s place within global structural process...they also used the ‘eternal’ laws of the social sciences as weapons to silence their opponents” (174-175). Zeleke creates a fascinating account of how Ethiopian students refashioned Marxist-Leninist categories like the feudal or reimagined the nationalities question in order to make their own situation fit the rules of historical materialism. In the process her intellectuals writing in journals like *Challenge* were taking part in a global process of reimagining Marxism by theorizing at what Stuart Hall calls “the limit case.”<sup>2</sup>

All three reviewers coming from different disciplines commended Elleni on the ambition and scope of her work. From African studies, Wendell Marsh writes that he reads the book “as a humanistic inquiry into the social sciences as a knowledge-form.” He goes on to say that reading *Ethiopia in Theory* provides a way of thinking through “what it means to be human in a world that has been made by the social sciences.” Writing from political science, Adom Getachew commends Elleni for her rejection of narratives of Ethiopian exceptionalism and for making visible the global circulation of ideas that shaped Ethiopian political and social thought leading up to the 1974 revolution and its aftermaths. However, Adom argues that Elleni moves too quickly from a discussion of the intellectual context of the Ethiopian Student Movement to its after effects. She asks how we as intellectual historians or political theorists establish relationships of influence. And from anthropology, Samar Al-Bulushi writes that Elleni eloquently demonstrates that the “persistent questions about what it means to decolonize knowledge production in African studies can only be addressed ‘by situating knowledge production in Africa within the historical processes that have led to contemporary political forms.’” Samar then goes on to highlight the ways in which Elleni argues that there is a “continued association of Western whiteness with modern knowledge and expertise” and that this explains the failure of Ethiopian social sciences to completely grasp its own realities (231). Finally, picking up on questions of the Whiteness of the social sciences, Elleni in her conclusion and her response reminds us how

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<sup>1</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, “The African University,” *The London Review of Books* 40:14 (2018): <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n14/mahmood-mamdani/the-african-university>.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Hall, “When was the Postcolonial? Thinking at the Limit,” in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (London: Routledge, 1996): 242-260 and Stuart Hall, “Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance,” in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*, edited by United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Paris: UNESCO: 1980): 305-345.

questions of disciplinary standards and objectivity have been marshalled to silence Black scholars and to prevent the development of social sciences in Africa that were grounded in African and African Diaspora realities. In the final analysis all of the reviewers agree that *Ethiopia in Theory* is a milestone in the collective project of reimagining the social sciences and reasserting the fundamental connection between theory and embodied praxis.

**Participants:**

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## REVIEW BY SAMAR AL-BULUSHI, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

In *Ethiopia in Theory*, Elleni Centime Zeleke imaginatively transgresses disciplinary boundaries to offer a rendering of the 1974 Ethiopian revolution that is part memoir, part historical ethnography, part political theory. Focusing on the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s and 1970s through an excavation of student journals and pamphlets, she connects the knowledge practices of the students themselves with contemporary debates about knowledge production in Africa. Zeleke cogently argues that persisting questions about what it means to decolonize knowledge production in African studies can only be addressed “by situating knowledge production in Africa within the historical processes that have led to contemporary political forms” (1). Situated knowledge offers a window into non-linear imaginaries of social change, and in the Ethiopian context, allows us to wrestle with the ways in which the past continues to haunt present-day epistemologies and theories of struggle.

As a child who grew up in exile (living in Guyana, Barbados, and Canada), Zeleke was forced to contend with the residue of sadness and loss that permeated the daily lives of her Ethiopian relatives. Nearly every Ethiopian social event she attended with her parents in the 1980s ended with a ballad from the Amharic songbook entitled *Tizita* (Memory), which was recorded one month after the revolution. Perplexed by the sense of loss that none of her relatives could explicitly name, she grappled with the persistence of *tizita* and writes that she was determined “to cure the adults of their commitment to nostalgia” (21). As an adult, however, she began to wrestle with the layers of complexity that have shaped the afterlife of the revolution. *Tizita* then became a method through which she “could finally move beyond the empiricism and positivism that has come to dominate so much of Ethiopian studies” (23). In embracing *tizita* as a structure of feeling, Zeleke aims to account for the ways in which memory shapes understandings of social and historical processes.<sup>3</sup> *Tizita* enables her to excavate the past “through a living dialogue with what haunted my childhood as a series of invisible ghosts” (22). In conversation with David Scott’s *Conscripts of Modernity*, Zeleke is committed to avoiding romanticized narratives, instead embracing tragedy as a form of historical criticism.<sup>4</sup>

She opens the text with a discussion of Dinaw Mengestu’s novel, *How to Read the Air*.<sup>5</sup> Observing parallels between the novel’s protagonist and her own experience growing up in a household where politics was routinely discussed at the dinner table, Zeleke draws us into the field of senses that have shaped her excavation of Ethiopian history, as she (like Mengestu’s protagonist Jonas) contends with the un-nameable ghosts that haunt her as a force-field. “What does it mean to do theory as memoir?” she asks (191). Zeleke argues that the practice of imagining the world is not a simple continuum of the present into the future; “How the dust settles is not exactly predetermined” (37). She notes that “Ethiopian politics continues to be haunted by the social conditions the students aimed to address, but failed to resolve” (189).

As Zeleke clarifies, *Ethiopia in Theory* is neither a history of the Ethiopian student movement nor a history of the revolution per se. Instead, it proposes a method that enables us to grapple with the historical dynamics at play between knowledge production and social practice, thereby eschewing social scientific positivism. Approaching knowledge production as situated and embodied, she illustrates how the students’ own self-understanding of who and what they were became part of the process of creating a wider vocabulary to theorize and address social problems in Ethiopia. Despite her use of the singular in relation to the student movement, one of her objectives is to capture the contested nature of that singularity, emphasizing that ‘the movement,’ like knowledge production itself, has been a site of social struggle.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Dinaw Mengestu, *How to Read the Air* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2011).

Until the 1960's, few spaces existed in Ethiopia for social and political critique: there were no officially recognized political parties and very few civil society organizations. But in the early 1960's, a group of anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist students emerged who opposed the developmental trajectory of Emperor Haile Selassie's regime. These students were largely from non-aristocratic families but constituted a newly educated class that emerged with the modernizing state. Through street demonstrations and the distribution of journals such as *Be Ready* (Tatke), *Struggle*, and *Challenge*, these students proclaimed that public space should be expanded to draw the masses into politics. They became the intellectual vanguard of the 1974 revolution, "linking the various needs of the population to larger political grievances" (3). As such, the movement represented "both an attempt from the top to restructure state-society relations and a popular initiative by a newly educated class of students to reshape the state from the bottom" (88).

We learn that the movement was transnational in more ways than one: with branches in Addis Ababa, North America, Europe, Lebanon, Algiers, and Moscow, it was influenced by social movements and social science literature that were in turn shaped by events in Vietnam, the Cold War, Black power struggles, and decolonization. Its members were in dialogue with international Marxism, Maoism, and decolonial discourses, even as they drew on their situated knowledge of Ethiopian politics and history. As such, the literature they produced became "a window through which to reflect on the connection between theory and practice in the context of dramatic social change" (6).

The ideas promulgated by the movement shaped the battle lines that were drawn in the Ethiopian civil wars of 1974-1991 (as she explains, nearly every major political party in Ethiopia traces its ideological roots to the debates that unfolded in the 1960s and 1970s). Zeleke pushes back against scholarship that attempts to evaluate "whether or not the students got their Marxism right," (78) insisting instead that we pay attention to the intellectual debates themselves. What interests Zeleke is "how they made sense of their social position vis-à-vis the history of global forces that created this regional nation-state in the nineteenth century" (79). Through her engagement with their own knowledge practices, we learn that the universalizing conceit of the social sciences came to dominate their epistemological and political frameworks: while students deployed concepts from the social sciences "to both think about the future and to act pragmatically in the present," many of these concepts worked to homogenize different historical experiences "into empty formulas" (146). The students' attachment to bourgeois freedom as an ideal form of knowledge production led to a gap between the *needs* of ordinary social actors and social scientific formulas used to *describe* ordinary people (147; my emphasis). As a consequence, critical thought "was reduced to a technique of social engineering" (147); "social progress became limited to finding a way in which the Ethiopian population could be organized to produce that (developmental vision) future." (147).

Nevertheless, Zeleke is clear that the story of the student movement is a "story about African political thought on the world stage" (81). Much of the scholarship on the Ethiopian revolution, she writes, takes the fact of the revolution for granted: "The questions and answers posed by the student movement are hardly every linked to longer social, political or economic trajectories that have framed Ethiopian, African, or even global history" (9). The implication of this silence is that Ethiopia's relationship to world history "is entirely derivative and rehearsed, and merely fits into a schema about the development of capitalist relationships" (256). Rather than dwell on the movement's shortcomings or contradictions, Zeleke sees these contradictions as productive, and as constitutive of new epistemologies and politics. As such, she is committed to a larger project: namely, what can the tensions that the students confronted offer as lessons to the wider world on questions of struggle and social change?

Later in the text, Zeleke offers a few reflections on why the student movement has been divorced from global histories of struggle. The first implicates the Ethiopian university, which she suggests is responsible for silences in African historiography more broadly "precisely because state sovereignty is premised on being both anti-colonial and anti-black at the same time... Is it not the case that knowledge production under a modernist African state must vigorously deny the blackness of being African, while at the same time the standard that constitutes the horizon of its legitimacy is based on not being like other Africans, but in fact being more civilized?" She continues: "Social studies in Ethiopia aim to prove that the state's horizon of legitimacy can be based in an Ethiopian reality, and yet it must efface that which appears to be too black." For Zeleke, race continues to be consequential in African politics, but is now "veiled through a discourse of the city as modern or civilized" (231). Her observations about the Ethiopian university and the modernist African state are significant

in this regard, as the continued association of Western whiteness with modern knowledge and expertise may explain the failure to ground Ethiopian social sciences in African realities and experiences.

A second potential explanation for the historical oversight of the student movement lies outside of Ethiopia. As Zeleke observes, trends in post-colonial theory (especially subaltern studies) have actively shaped the critique of Eurocentrism within African studies. One effect of this has been a shift in focus away from notions of universality to an emphasis on cultural difference; a second is that many post-colonial scholars have been keen to “distance themselves from the Marxist-inflected radical politics of national liberation that characterized much of the work of third world thinkers in the immediate post-independence era; and at the same time, they treat the texts of the early anti-colonial thinkers as foundational to Third World context” (197). This is a productive tension that deserves further discussion, particularly because it largely concerns scholars who may be *of* the South but who live and work in the Global North, and, as such, are inevitably shaped by political and intellectual trends in the northern academy.

While Zeleke’s work arguably falls squarely within what Cedric Robinson would refer to as the ‘black radical tradition,’ it is noteworthy that she does not engage his writings, perhaps because she has observed this very tension in his own work.<sup>6</sup> Although Robinson is known for his critique of the Western origins of Marxist theory, the reality remains that most Marxists around the world are people of color, “thus rupturing the easy binary between a presumed European Marxism and a non-Marxist radical tradition for people of color.”<sup>7</sup> Yet as scholars Zeleke and Robinson have much in common, from their commitment to actual historical experience in theory building, to a more imaginative conceptualization of struggle and liberation. “The work of imagining a world is not a simple continuum of present into future,” she writes (189). Though Zeleke is not prepared to let go of the idea of social progress altogether, she insists on the need “to move beyond a unidirectional sense of history to one where different experiences of time could co-exist and be thought about simultaneously” (189). Crucially for Zeleke, the process of moving away from this unidirectional sense of history “is not just the work of individual imagination but is bound up in collective social struggle: thought and practice together” (189). Anthropologist Damien Sojoyner, who studied with Robinson, has similarly wrestled with white/Western notions of temporality and progress: whereas time in the context of whiteness is “fueled by notions of ‘inevitable’ and ‘unbounded’ development and progress,” time in the context of blackness is often invoked to lament a lack of “internal fortitude to change their circumstances.”<sup>8</sup> In looking beyond the limitations of Western philosophical traditions, *black radical time* transforms time “from something that is to be manipulated and controlled to a paradigm where time is a shared construct that enables creative dialogue around rigorous analysis and solutions.”<sup>9</sup>

While I see clear connections between Zeleke’s work and the black radical tradition, I have long been troubled by the singularity (and indeed U.S.-centrism) that is often implied in the ‘the’ of this tradition. Zeleke’s rich engagement with the Ethiopian student movement serves as a critical reminder of the plurality of black geographies of struggle,<sup>10</sup> and it is precisely this plurality that is generative of new memories, and new imaginations of the future.

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<sup>6</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> Yousuf Al-Bulushi, “Thinking Racial Capitalism and Black Radicalism from Africa: An Intellectual Geography of Cedric Robinson’s World-System,” *Geoforum* (January 2020): 1-11.

<sup>8</sup> Damien M. Sojoyner “Dissonance in Time: (Un)Making and (Re)Mapping of Blackness,” in Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin, eds., *Futures of Black Radicalism* (New York: Verso Books, 2017): 59-71; here, 61, 63.

<sup>9</sup> Sojoyner, “Dissonance in Time,” 66.

<sup>10</sup> Adam Bledsoe and Willie Jamaal Wright, “The Pluralities of Black Geographies,” *Antipode* 51:2 (2019): 419-437.

## REVIEW BY ADOM GETACHEW, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

In Ethiopian and African diasporic studies, Ethiopia is often rendered a site of exceptionalism. For the former, an orientalist study of Ethiopia has been primarily concerned with excavating the country's ancient roots centered on the founding myth of the Orthodox Church and privileging Semitic and Byzantine roots.<sup>11</sup> If Ethiopian studies is preoccupied with an exceptional non-blackness, in diasporic studies, Ethiopia stands for an exemplary blackness—the sole African country that was never colonized. From the Ethiopianism of the nineteenth century to the Rastafarianism of the twentieth, Ethiopia marks the space of African redemption.<sup>12</sup> Though directed toward opposed political and ideological ends, both of these accounts mobilize Ethiopia as a kind of theory, as an abstract concept, an empty signifier in and through which larger questions about civilization, emancipation and racial equality are staged.

One of the most important contributions of Elleni Centime Zeleke's *Ethiopia in Theory* is its rejection of these narratives of exceptionalism. Ethiopia *in* theory rather than as theory, seeks to situate Ethiopia in the world and in particular to make visible the global circulation of ideas that transformed Ethiopian social and political thought leading up to the 1974 revolution and that shaped the country's political trajectories in its aftermath.

Zeleke focuses on the Ethiopian student movement, a central element of the revolt against Emperor Haile Selassie's regime that gave shape to the popular dissent of the 1960s and 1970s. The student movement itself was part of a global wave of unrest in the 1960s, and while 1968 is associated with the height of student mobilization in Europe and the United States, 1969 was the pivotal moment in Ethiopia as the murder of student leader Tilahun Gezaw unleashed a new wave of radicalization and mass protests.<sup>13</sup> The Ethiopian student movement had its base in Addis Ababa's then Haile Selassie University, organized through the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), but it was a transnational formation with outposts like Ethiopian Student Union Europe and the Ethiopian Student Association of North America. Through these networks, the student movement published a range of journals including *Challenge*, *Struggle*, *Combat* and *Tatek* (Be Ready), which sought to diagnose the social and political crisis of Ethiopia with the aim of laying out pathways of social transformation. Though ideologically diverse, the student movement presented itself as engaged in "scientific socialism" (11). Zeleke is not interested in overcoming or rejecting this self-description, but aims to articulate an immanent critique of the students' self-description.

Zeleke's focuses on the journal *Challenge*, but one wonders how this journal maps on to the wider terrain of the student movement and its transnational networks. Are we to take the journal as representative of the wider formation? Or does it represent a distinctive slice of the movement? These questions are particularly important because *Challenge* was published by students based in the United States and circulated in English. Students outside of Ethiopia played a central role in the theoretical debates of the movement so this is not meant to imply that the 'homegrown' formations should have been centered in Zeleke's study. Instead, I want only to suggest that reconstructing the ways *Challenge's* American context shaped its formation and attending to its connections with the wider movement would provide a fuller accounting of the specific perspective of the journal and its contributors.

<sup>11</sup> On the orientalism of Ethiopian studies, see Elizabeth W. Giorgis, *Modernist Art in Ethiopia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019), 30-36.

<sup>12</sup> The literature of Ethiopianism in its nineteenth century and later variations is vast. For a recent study of the complex and contradictory ways in which imperial Ethiopia figured in projects of racial solidarity see Nadia Nurhuessein, *Black Land: Imperial Ethiopianism and African America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> On this point see Hannah Borenstein, "The Legacies of the Ethiopian Student Movement: An Interview with Bahru Zewde," <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/12/ethiopian-student-movement-bahru-zewde-abiy-ahmed-1974-revolution>, accessed February 2020.

But aiming less at a comprehensive study of the student moment, Zeleke approaches *Challenge* as a window into how members of the student movement developed a globally informed social and political theory (79). To do this, students like Melesse Ayalew and Dessalegn Rahmato first had to contend with the depictions of Ethiopia as an exceptional country. Writing in the context of African decolonization, when Ethiopia was envisioned as a pioneer of independence and pan-Africanism, Melesse recast the relationship between Ethiopia and the African continent. He argued that Ethiopia was no longer the exceptional example of African independence, but in fact lagged behind the rest of the continent (105). While African states were engaged in democratic self-government and experiments of social transformation, Ethiopia was trapped by a backward “feudal political-economy” (105). This account revealed Ethiopia’s Christian origins as largely an imperial story through which the Northern and highland Amhara kingdom colonized the south and centralized the state beginning in the late nineteenth century. The anti-imperial triumph in 1896 against the Italians in the Battle of Adwa, memorialized in Pan-Africanism, was recast by the student movement as the moment of imperial consolidation.

Out of this diagnosis, *Challenge* elaborated two central conundrums for Ethiopia—the nationalities question and the land question. Each of these was constructed through an engagement with Marxist social theory and anticolonial thought. Their theoretical references are Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Frantz Fanon and Mao Zedong, while they looked to the example of the Chinese and Cuban revolutions. Out of these engagements, the contributors to the journal sought to produce an agenda of social analysis and change that centered on the “principles of democratic government, popular rights and national reconstruction” (110). But as Dessalegn argued, these commitments did not stem from loyalty to Western ideals and methods. Instead, in keeping with the theorists and examples of revolution that informed the contributors, they sought to develop an account of the specificity of Ethiopia’s political formation and develop an account of social change that attended closely to this terrain (110). In this regard, Zeleke’s story is one of “the appropriation and indigenization of Marxist and mainstream social science” in Ethiopia and Africa more broadly (1).

This effort at indigenization emerged in the wider context of developing Third World social theory. Zeleke illustrates this in at least three ways. First, the category of “feudal” was no longer viewed as a pre-capitalist mode of production. Instead, Dessalegn and others tracked the ways in which Ethiopia’s integration into a capitalist world system shaped that character of land tenure systems. This account draws on Ghanaian anticolonial leader and first president Kwame Nkrumah’s theory of neocolonialism. While Ethiopia was not a formal colony, it experienced neo-colonial domination in which the imperial state depended on foreign capital and investment in ways that restructures domestic political and social relations (108). Second, the idea that Ethiopia was not “one nation” but a multinational empire prompted a reexamination of the relationship between national and class struggles. Wallegein Mekonnen turned to corporate rights of nationality as a way of overcoming Amhara dominance, but suggested by an unclear logic that this path would make Ethiopia a “genuine nation” (124). Third, the absence of a revolutionary class, either the bourgeoisie or the working class, raised the questions of political action: who would lead the revolution and how it could be realized. In the post-1969 context of enhanced state repression, members of the student movement began to advocate more stridently for armed struggle (123-124). For Melesse Ayalew (writing by the pen name Rejjim Gouzo, which translates as ‘Long Journey’), the growing dominance of this perspective stemmed from the “visions and fantasies” of the Ethiopian “ultra-left” who had given up on the political project of mass mobilization (122).

This is an important auto-critique of the movement’s increasingly pessimistic view of constructing “a popular political praxis” from the “fertile site” of everyday life (122). Despite its insight, however, Zeleke argues that Ayalew’s critique, like the writings of other movement participants “scarifies the interpretive in favour of the programmatic” (122). In Zeleke’s view this a significant limitation of the student movement. In their hands social science (and social theory especially) was framed as “a battlefield” (11) and they deployed its concepts as tools of critique and polemic. For instance, by the 1970 issue of *Challenge*, feudalism was transformed from a category that names a mode of production to an all-encompassing sign of Ethiopian backwardness (125).

The fraught relationship between the analytical, polemical, and programmatic aspirations of the Ethiopian Student Movement is not specific to it and might be fruitfully placed in conversation with various formations in the movement’s global context. But Zeleke’s narrative moves quickly (too quickly in my view) from this theoretically rich nexus to consider



the legacies of the student movement in Ethiopian economic and political policy. Here Zeleke describes how the movement's framing of the nationalities and land questions reverberated in the Derg Regime and persisted after the 1991 when the coalition led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) took state power. For instance, Zeleke notes that "the logic behind the various rural land proclamations [of 1975] was justified in the language of the student movement" (139). Later she argues that "the 1995 constitution also reflects the language and logic of the resolutions [on nationalities and Eritrean independence] adopted during the nineteenth congress of the [Ethiopian Student Union of North America]" (145).

But what are the standards by which we, as intellectual historians and political theorists, establish this relationship of influence and implementation? What are the intellectual and institutional vectors through which the demands and analysis of a social movement get incorporated as state program? I ask this not because I reject or doubt that such influence occurred. In fact, Zeleke's study is commendable precisely for the ways in which it tracks how the central preoccupations of the revolution continue to permeate Ethiopian political life. But missing from this is a genealogical account of the ways in which influence came to be exercised. As a result, the move from student debates to state program appears as a straightforward instance of translation rather than a contradictory, refracted and selective process. Resisting the student movement's own investments in the programmatic might have provided greater purchase on these questions of process and vectors of transmission. Still, in attuning us to the constitution of social science as an ideological and political battlefield, Zeleke offers a model of how we might map the global Third World efforts to indigenize social theory in service of social transformation.

REVIEW BY WENDELL MARSH, RUTGERS UNIVERSITY-NEWARK

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*Dreaming Home in African Studies*

African Studies, as a division of area studies, has often been criticized as being non-, or even anti-theoretical. From a strictly disciplinary perspective, African studies is at best ideographic, an accumulation of descriptive studies about exotic places or at worst occasions for the application of theories developed elsewhere for the purpose of achieving a practical goal.<sup>14</sup> Among critical scholars who have tried to think from Africa, however, it has been the incapacity of Western Theory to make sense of African experiences or to acknowledge Africa's contributions to Theory that has rendered the Continent non-theoretical.<sup>15</sup> Of course, Africa's absence in the discourse of Theory and the aversion to theorization that dominates African Studies are both structural, emerging as they do from a global history of capitalism that a multiple, fractured, and contradictory 'we' have inherited. Elleni Centime Zeleke's *Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964-2016* boldly takes on the problem that this inheritance poses for thinking Africa and the world today.

Substantively, Zeleke's argument is that there was an important circulation of ideas and people through and around the university, the state, and the battlefield in the years leading up to the Ethiopian revolution of 1974 among participants of the robust student movement that sought to transform society and subsequently in all of the vital political moments in the country's volatile history. Having developed a sophisticated theoretical system to take on the problem of the social sciences in Africa through an engagement with postcolonial theory, the history of capitalism, and the Frankfurt school of critical theory – which she presents in the sixth and final chapter – her book makes an unlikely intervention in an African studies marked by discourses of decolonizing. Chapter 1, "The Children of the Revolution: Toward an Alternative Method," situates knowledge in her own body as longing and loss conceptualized as the cultural and aesthetic form *Tizita*, a genre of music that constitutes a structure of feeling. She then provides a historical sociology of knowledge in chapter 2, "Social Science is a Battlefield: Rethinking the Historiography of the Ethiopian Revolution" through a critique of the historiography of the Ethiopian revolution by paying attention to the intellectuals, institutions, and ideas that have framed the event and its aftermath. In Chapter 3 "Challenge: Social Science in the Literature of the Student Movement," Zeleke traces the appropriation of modernization theory in the debates leading up to the revolution by using the journal *Challenge* as a prism with which to view the movement of ideas around the meanings of revolution and autonomy from a specialized technical discussion of a few students to national policy and mass politics. Finally, in chapters 4 and 5, she identifies the continuities with the pre-revolution debates in the issues that animated the 2005 election: peasant access to land and the self determination of nationalities.

To be clear, Zeleke's intervention is primarily methodological. Since the book looks at the keywords revolution, knowledge production, Ethiopia, and at the primary sources of student journals, committee reports, etc, one might be forgiven for presuming that it represents a study of the Ethiopian Student Movement, on radical print culture in Africa, or simply an intellectual history of modern Ethiopia. But the book is not so much *about* any of those things as it is a study *through* them. Such subtlety and audacity are effectively performed in the repetition of book's opening line: "This book tells the story of how to tell the story of revolution in the Third World" (1). Readers are thus immediately put on notice that if they were expecting a straightforward account of the Ethiopian revolution, they will be disappointed. Instead, the doubling of story-telling furnishes the space of a methodological reflection. There is similar doubling throughout the introduction and first chapter in the way she poses her guiding questions. These questions do not have straight-forward answers but require readers to go along with the writer in a process. If they are worried that they might not be able to do it, or if they only know

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<sup>14</sup> David Szanton, "The Origin, Nature, and Challenge of Area Studies in the United States" in Szanton, ed., *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); 1-33.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Tiyambe Zeleke, "African Studies and Universities since Independence" *Transition: An International Review* (2009): 110-135.

how to read to glean facts, then the author gives careful instructions from her own close reading of a contemporary novel by the diasporic Ethiopian Dinaw Mengestu, *How to Read the Air*.<sup>16</sup> The novel, along with the Ethiopian elegiac musical form of Tizita, is an important resource for her, as her illusive object—how modes of social-scientific thinking participated in transformations in Ethiopia that ended up in violence, displacement, and dispossession—is as ephemeral and fleeting as the charged air before a world-historical event or the tension created in the musicality of a dirge. As such, she claims a space for serious reading in African studies. No skimming of the introduction, conclusion, and section headings of the chapters will get you far in this book. The doubling of story-telling with which the book begins and continues throughout as both rhetorical move and analytical gesture that operationalizes irony, contradiction, and expectation loops you into a process of thinking that is more spatial than sequential; that is, it is more of a journey that covers ground, than a route that can be plotted on a map.

Indeed, Zeleke describes the book as the search for an alternative method. She settles upon the word memoir to describe this alternative method, one that allows her to make an account of herself, of how she has come to be by thinking through the role social science has performed in the world-historical events that have had the definitive impact in shaping her form of life. She identifies her work as a research agenda that follows through with V. Y. Mudimbe's critique of the discursive construction of Africa within modernity.<sup>17</sup> But where others cite Mudimbe to describe or refute the impossibility of thinking Africa beyond its histories of slavery and colonization, she turns to consider how social science has been practiced within African social formations in order not so much to discover something authentically African but to think through all that has been inherited and lost. It does not stop at the daunting irrevocability of the colonial as Mudimbe theorized, but carries out an inquiry into the consequences of that irrevocability as it played out in the emancipatory project of the social sciences and the generation of intellectuals that were its custodians. It also pushes against the 'irrevocability' and the silences of the social-scientific African studies by assuming her own position as a situated speaking subject, one who refuses to disavow her subjectivity in order to become a lifeless and odd copy of a universal subject who speaks in the tone and tenor of objectivity just as she refuses the fate of being an informant. Importantly, she also refuses to relegate to a similar fate the intellectuals who form the dramatis personae of her story. In short, she rejects the paradigm of information in the name of a story in which people move and are moved by the force of history, all the while formulating thoughts and coming to insights through experience in and with others. The cast of characters, the theorists and activists of the student moment, are not then sources or informants in the historical anthropology of the student movement as standard African studies would posit; they are resources for thinking to be engaged with, critiqued; they are fellow travelers in the pursuit of understanding. One is reminded of Saidiya Hartman's historical method of mourning in *Lose Your Mother* where she takes her own subjectivity as both historical evidence that is a trace of the past and the means by which history might be made.<sup>18</sup>

Although Zeleke describes her approach to the role of the social sciences in the Ethiopian revolution and its after-lives as an alternative method, I wonder if it is not more of a counter-method, or even an antidote. By that I mean that Zeleke's research practice seeks to cut through the formalist excesses of an African studies that seek to objectify African life into containable phenomena. It is a counter-method of a thinker who is embedded, interested, and situated within, and yet displaced from, the social formation that concerns her. It is a counter-method that forms an antagonistic relationship with the dominant methods of social science. For that reason, the book will certainly receive an uneven, if not odd reception. Some will believe that her book is about the student movement or about Ethiopian political history more broadly. Some will find the book uneven in its organization and sporadic in its coverage of time. Some will find an unreliable method whose results are not replicable by other scholars. But those who draw these conclusions would have failed to read her well and

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<sup>16</sup> Dinaw Mengestu, *How to Read the Air* (New York: Random House, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Oxford: James Currey, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Lose your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

would have failed to notice the subtle nuances of language that make this book a book of theory, that is, a book about thinking and living in the world.

True, the book has all the accouterments of the hardest of social sciences. And indeed it presents itself as social science. But I think it might be more generative to read this book as a humanistic inquiry into the social sciences as a knowledge-form. That is to say, the book offers a reading of what it means to be human in a world that has been made by the social sciences. As a political project, social science in Ethiopia sought to transform society, as it has globally.<sup>19</sup> In order to appreciate the political imperative, epistemic elaboration, and the social ramifications of this social science project, one must be willing to step outside of it, to make an account of it and to tell its story. This, in effect, is what Zeleke does with great care, rigor, and urgency. And while her ‘results’ are not replicable—no other person could write this book—it still offers a promising model for thinking Africa in a moment when the call for a decolonial knowledge has rocked university halls, and struggle has toppled the statutory symbols of the colonizing structure, articulating a demand in the process to remove the economic barriers to education. This book directs us towards working through the sedimentation of successive layers of knowledge production that we have inherited instead of proposing that we might erase history to re-discover a time before untouched by modernity or simply invent the future by the sheer force of will. The designation of the work as social science, then, is unnecessary, perhaps even distracting. But given the carefulness with which the book is written, one must read that designation as strategic.

In closing, then, how can we call such a work? What name can we give to it? It might be useful to read the book with reference to the recent manifesto by the 2018 *Wild on Collective* “Theses on Theory and History.” For them “critical history is a history of the present that links past to present dynamically, recognizes both the persisting or repeating character of the past in the present and the non-necessary character of pasts present and presents past – whether through lines of genealogical descent, uncanny returns, haunting traces and spectral forces, or nonsynchronous contradictions within an untimely now.”<sup>20</sup> Zeleke herself uses “critical history” to describe the possibility of tracing concepts, political movements, and historical and philosophical problems posed by the social sciences in Ethiopia and Africa. While her inquiry features all of the analytic predilections of an empiricist social science, it also embraces the excess of life left out and refuses the fiction of neutrality. Instead, in considering the hauntings of memory, of the work of the imagination in the history of the real, a sensitivity to seething presence in the air, she dares to consider what the *Wild on Collective* calls the “obscure navel of the dream,” that place “where history does and does not ‘make sense,’ where there is an opening to interpretative and political innovation.” This book raises many questions, both methodological and substantial, that mark out a promising research and publishing agenda for Zeleke in the years to come. In this book, she has cleared the ground before a new house can be built. Having seen the blueprints laid out before the plot marked off by its cornerstones, we can only anticipate the home to come.

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<sup>19</sup> Timothy Mitchell, “The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science” in *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); 74-118.

<sup>20</sup> Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott, and Gary Wilder, *Theses on Theory and History* (website), Wild on Collective, May 2018, <http://theoryrevolt.com/>, accessed 10 September 2020.

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 RESPONSE BY ELLENI CENTIME ZELEKE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
 

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In 2018 Jean Allman, then President of the African Studies Association (ASA) in the United States, titled the talk she delivered as the organization's annual presidential lecture “#HerskovitsMustFall? A Meditation on Whiteness, African Studies and the Unfinished Business of 1968.”<sup>21</sup> The talk marked the 50 years from when the question of the “racial landscape of knowledge production” was first put on the table by the Black Caucus of the ASA. Allman primarily focuses on the institutional demands made by the Black Caucus, and connects those demands to contemporary statistics showing who occupies positions of power within the association. Allman shows that, overwhelmingly, white male scholars have dominated the organization's administrative positions, and have received the majority of the association's prizes. When people of colour do receive top prizes, they are usually African men; and even then they often share the podium with a white scholar. Black women scholars receive the least number of professional accolades, and in some categories they have never received any recognition.

Allman's talk links these contemporary institutional problems to foundational patterns set up in the early days of the ASA, and claims that scholarly practices connected to Melville Herskovits constitute part of the problem. Herskovits was, of course, the founder of the ASA, and is considered by many to be the founder of African studies in the United States. Strikingly, Allman points out the ways in which Herskovits deployed the language of “scholarly objectivity” to police those whom he saw as illegitimate participants in the study of Africa. Most famously, she reminds us that Herskovits took pride in blocking the publication of W.E.B. Du Bois's *Encyclopedia Africana*. Apparently, Herskovits complained that Du Bois's work was animated by questions of race and racial injustice and as such lost its scholarly neutrality. This meant that Du Bois had to delay the project until he was offered the patronage of Kwame Nkrumah's newly independent Ghana, support that came too late for him to realize the *Encyclopedia*.

Allman's lecture raises interesting questions about what it might look like to reform a system of knowledge production. For the most part, Allman focuses on questions of inclusion and participation by black scholars in the ASA. But Herskovits's use of the language of objectivity to exclude black participation in the ASA raises the question of what the proper method is for the study of Africa. If the language of scholarly objectivity has always been racially coded, how do we produce scholarship that challenges this technology of silence? This raises further questions for me: What kind of writing is appropriate to a project that can attend to Du Bois's aspirations for the study of Africa? And how do we appropriately source material?

My book *Ethiopia in Theory* uses the case of the Ethiopian student movement and its attendant social revolution as a way to both imaginatively and empirically explore these questions through a single case study. I begin my book by showing that the problem of doing African studies must also be located in the way institutions and practices of the social sciences travel to Africa and are taken up by practitioners, social movements, and everyday people. Second, I examine the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s and 1970s as one of the first large-scale attempts to use the methods of the social sciences in an Ethiopian context. Third, by paying attention to the way the student movement appropriated social theory in order to apply it to the Ethiopian case, I begin to unravel the way the local has become part of transnational social science networks. Fourth, by critically engaging the specific legacy of the social sciences in one type of political project, I am better able to reflexively ask myself what it means to practice the social sciences today. In particular, I ask: What kind of method of writing or query matches the tangled web I wish to uncover about “what it means to be human in a world remade by the social sciences”? (to quote my interlocutor in this forum, Wendell Marsh).

In this sense, then, my book takes its cues less from a reformed social science project emanating from the halls of the global north than from the transdisciplinary writing found in African literary platforms such as *Kwani?* and *Chimurenga*. These

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<sup>21</sup> Jean Allman, 2018 Presidential Lecture, “#HerskovitsMustFall? A Meditation on Whiteness, African Studies, and the Unfinished Business of 1968,” at the 61st Annual Meeting of the ASA, Atlanta Marriott Marquis, November 29–December 1, 2018, [https://youtu.be/mSb\\_N2Ly8VY](https://youtu.be/mSb_N2Ly8VY).

platforms follow a trend best articulated in Achille Mbembe's 2002 article in *Public Culture* that exhorts Africans to search for an African mode of self-writing.<sup>22</sup> Irreverent in their writing style, these literary platforms mix theory, memoir, poetry, music, and empirical study to compose pieces that imagine new paths towards self-creation and self-emancipation.<sup>23</sup>

This attempt is best exemplified in an anthology of writing collected under the title *Who Killed Kabila?* and published by the Chimurenga collective. An outstanding piece in this volume is the essay written by the Kenyan novelist Yvonne Owuor, entitled "François Luambo Luanzo Makiadi," after the famous Congolese singer. Owuor says that the question of *Who Killed Kabila* is an incomplete question: "It fits under the same cosmogony of the other unresolved mysteries such as: Who killed Lumumba?; Who killed Tom Mboya?; Who killed Sankara? ... To engage such questions would require that the whole world pause for a season, because to answer them would mean that the mystery of human wretchedness and its illogical death instinct were close to being solved."<sup>24</sup> And yet, given that the season of colonial violence has not paused, what next, how do we write about Africa? Owuor turns to the music of François Luambo Luanzo Makiadi (Franco) both to answer that question and as a model for her own writing. It seems that the answer has something to do with the Sebene style in Congolese music: how the straight line of a melody is interrupted by the looping sounds of background guitars and the shouts of an animator.<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere on the Chimurenga blog, the editors write that music becomes the context that shows that it is not A or B or C that killed Kabila. "But rather A and B and C. All options are both true and necessary—it's the coming together of all these individuals, groups and circumstances, on one day, within the proliferating course of the history, that does it."<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, I turn to a ballad within the Amharic songbook, entitled Tizita for guidance on how to proceed in my study of Africa. Tizita is often translated as nostalgia or memory but it also refers to a genre of song making and a musical scale. It tracks the relationship between form and content by renewing the present through "hauling possessions" from yesteryear.<sup>27</sup> It is full of the uncanny, instead of the standardized and systematized. It points to the unwieldy status of the present. It is from here that we find hope for the future. It is how we fashion new modes of African self-writing.

I am therefore grateful to my interlocutors in this forum for recognizing the spirit in which my book was written. Marsh and Samar Al-Bulushi have listened well to a collective project that is theirs too, that emanates from an African mode of self-writing. Marsh and Al-Bulushi understand that my book is primarily concerned with method: I tell a story about how we can begin to write a story of revolution in Africa. Distinguishing between Black studies and African studies, Marsh and Al-Bulushi suggest that my book borrows from Black studies in order to make an important intervention in overcoming the foundational problems of African studies. The Introduction by Alden Young also helps to situate the stakes of the project. That being the case, you can forgive my misgivings when Adom Getachew claims that I write that the student movement no

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<sup>22</sup> Achille Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-Writing," *Public Culture* 14:1 (2002): 239-273.

<sup>23</sup> See especially *Kwani?* 05, Part 1 and 2, which focuses on the context and violent aftermath of the 2007 Kenyan elections.

<sup>24</sup> Yvonne Owuor, "François Luambo Luanzo Makiadi" in *Who Killed Kabila II* (Capetown: Chimurenga Library Service, 2019), 56.

<sup>25</sup> See Gwen Ansell, "Parsing Kabila through Rumba," *Mail and Guardian*, November 1, 2019, <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-11-01-00-parsing-kabila-through-rumba>.

<sup>26</sup> See the description of the anthology and the role of music in putting it together on the Chimurenga website <http://chimurengachronic.co.za/the-chronic-who-killed-kabila/>.

<sup>27</sup> For translation and interpretation of various Tizita songs see: Woubshet, Dagmawit, "Tizita: A New World Interpretation," *Callaloo* 32:2 (2009): 629-634.

longer understood the category “feudal” as belonging to a pre-capitalist mode of production. Using the work of Jairus Banaji, I in fact argue that the student movement failed to grasp the ways that peasant-based agricultural practices were already incorporated into capitalist forms of agrarian change (Banaji 9).<sup>28</sup> For me this failure on the part of the student movement becomes evidence of how they were unable to recover what Mudimbe in the *Invention of Africa* calls the “choses du texte” of living and breathing Africans.<sup>29</sup> Mudimbe’s argument here is that what exists as part of the everyday life of Africa is more often than not constitutively ignored by the social science practitioner and their taxonomies.

One must also question Getachew’s designation of the Ethiopian student movement as being primarily based in Addis Ababa. As my research shows, the two political parties mentioned by Getachew were founded outside of Ethiopia. As I described in my book, most of the leading members of the student movement moved back-and-forth between Ethiopia and other locations including New York, Algiers, Berlin, Beirut, Moscow and Paris. It could even be argued that the social theory produced by the movement was primarily produced on university campuses around the world rather than in Addis Ababa. This writing was also primarily produced in the scientific languages associated with the modern university such as English and French. What is therefore striking about the Ethiopian student movement is the porousness through which they imagined borders. In practice, *contra* Getachew’s argument, home, was more than one place at any given moment.

Getachew reads my interpretation of the writings of the Ethiopian student movement within the framework of Political Science. The question of method, and the articulation of texts, movements, and politics in Africa, is reduced to “the standards through which we, as intellectual historians and political theorists, establish the relationship of influence [...]”. Later, she asks me to perform a genealogy of ideas between the student movement and social policy, while I prefer to show how persons and ideas, language, and references continually show up in a variety of texts, both those associated with the Ethiopian student movement and state policy documents. Where her review suggests a search for lines of descent, I am in search of hauntings, and a new way of writing Africa. The contrast recalls the problem of scholarly objectivity at the heart of African studies (Herskovits vs Du Bois): To what end can the search for exact lines of descent serve? Further, if to speak of genealogy is to refer to Foucault, is descent what he was after when looking for a family resemblance across time in different texts and social practices?<sup>30</sup>

One day in 2014, while sitting under a lemon tree in Addis Ababa, and not too far from a pomegranate tree, an informant I had become close to in the course of doing research brought out a box of books, pamphlets, and texts that she wished to sell in the city’s second hand book market. She hoped that in selling these books she could raise enough money to buy the medicines needed to care for her diabetes. In the box was a book given to her by the Pan-Africanist George Padmore that contained his inscription and annotations. Seeing the book, I immediately became obsessed with preserving it for future generations, but my informant would have none of it. She wanted to sell her books, she needed the money, let the papers perish. It was an instructive lesson for me. There was no panic on her part about conserving the past. If I wanted to know what happened, it would not be revealed by too-easy access to an archive. Truth for her was a process that must be continually re-established, and worked for, it could not be found in any archive as such. Silence also speaks. Nothing ever really disappears if you know how to listen. And so, she taught me, somewhere in the second hand book market of Addis Ababa lies the keys to another historian’s project. It was not my story to tell. When the time was right, perhaps Padmore’s book would be recovered. Where its origins lay would be hard to say, but it would have something to do with A, and B, and

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<sup>28</sup> Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> VY. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> See Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in John Richardson and Brian Leiter, eds., *Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978): 139-164.

C. All the same my informant would hardly be central to the story. Needing her medicines, my informant was ok with that. She was sure a more compelling truth would emerge as a result.