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Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960-1974

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The Rise of Student Radicalism in Ethiopia

As in Russia, China, Cuba, and elsewhere, students and intellectuals have been the carriers of revolutionary ideology in Ethiopia. By all accounts, by the mid-1960s Haile Selassie I University had become the center of a student movement that was rapidly gathering momentum toward extreme forms of political activism. The African scholar Ali A. Mazrui, who gave a talk to the student body in December 1973, characterized Ethiopian students as "the most radical African students [he] had ever addressed."¹ Any study of the causes of the Ethiopian Revolution must, therefore, begin by establishing the factors that led to the progressive radicalization of Ethiopian students and intellectuals. One basic reason the elaboration and implementation of a reformist agenda was prevented, at the crucial moment when the imperial regime became weak enough to accept the necessity of serious reforms, was undoubtedly the strong opposition of students and intellectuals, who were committed to nothing less than Marxist-Leninist socialism.

Conditions favorable to reformist solutions had indeed emerged when in February 1974, following social and military protests, Haile Selassie dismissed the old cabinet and nominated Endalkatchew Makonnen as the new prime minister. The latter formed a new cabinet and promised changes, including a land reform proposal. The nomination of Endalkatchew confirms that Haile Selassie had finally understood the necessity of reforms: Unfortunate for the possibility of making reforms, the military overthrew the new prime minister under the pretext of appeasing the continuous protests of students against him. The protests were ultimately ideologically driven, as evidenced, for instance, when "on March 11 (1974), thousands of students demonstrated, and burned the effigy of Prime Minister Endalkatchew Makonnen. For the first time, they openly called for the formation of a 'People's Government.'"²

Factors of Student Radicalization

Studies analyzing the causes of student activism abound. To limit ourselves to those dealing with student movements in third world countries, activism is generally attributed to social as well as psychological and intellectual factors. Many studies even recognize protest as an established function of students in transitional societies. As Seymour M. Lipset notes, "In the underdeveloped countries, university students do not just prepare themselves for future roles in public life; they play a significant part in the political life of their countries even during their student period."³ The reasons for the high level of student activism in the developing world are not hard to find: the weakness of the middle class, the absence of representative governments, bans on political parties and freedom of expression, and the use of repressive methods of government concur in making students "the bearers of public opinion."⁴ In developed countries, students need not become the voice of the people, given that the practice of democracy allows parties and groups such as labor unions to express social protests and fight for reforms. Student demonstrations, no doubt frequent in developed countries, often reflect dissident positions that political parties are reluctant to support.

According to many scholars, one factor that encourages the politicization of students is the special treatment that universities usually receive from third world governments. While such governments are quick to repress labor unions and political parties, they typically take "a permissive attitude toward student values and activity" by granting a relative autonomy to their institutions of higher education.⁵ A number of reasons explain this special treatment. First, so long as student protests remain confined to campuses and do not spill over into other social sectors, dictatorial governments see no serious threat to their power. Students can neither paralyze the economic life of the country nor constitute an insurrectional force able to remove a government. Second, the embedded link between academic freedom and higher education does not allow a purely repressive policy: short of closing universities, governments have no direct way to shield students from critical ideas. Third, governments acquire a bad reputation when they crack down on universities. It is as though they come up against the advancement of knowledge and free research, not to mention the damage inflicted to the national prestige, which is often symbolized by the erection of a sumptuous university amid urban destitution. Even dictatorial regimes resent being perceived as opponents of enlightenment.

No less conducive to political activism is campus life itself. That a large number of students find themselves "at one location, with similar interests, and subject to similar stimuli from the environment gives a powerful impetus to organizational activities of all kinds."⁶ Indeed, the concentration of a

large number of students in a relatively isolated location makes communication easy, and so fosters organizational schemes. Ideas spread rapidly and without expensive means, as it is easy to distribute leaflets and organize meetings. What is more, the fact of living together in a secluded environment develops a spirit of solidarity that results in the adoption of common attitudes to external stimuli. We cannot emphasize enough the impact of the development of common attitudes. In addition to creating "a more cohesive community from which to recruit members," the spirit of solidarity drives the majority of students to support the initiatives or the views of a minority, even if they do not individually subscribe to them.⁷ A further reason the majority tends to follow the lead of minority groups is that campus life means emancipation from parental authority. The remoteness of parents creates a void of authority that exposes many students to peer influence, especially that of senior students. The development of solidaristic attitudes thus greatly benefits organized and active groups: it facilitates recruitment, just as it tends to prompt the alignment of the majority to the views of activist students.

Scholars of student politics readily connect the tendency to radicalization with the very characteristics of youth. Since "hope and idealism tend to be more a feature of youth than of age," radicalization and the very idea of revolution resonate with youth.⁸ Unlike older people, who tend to hold moderate or conservative views, the young are generally attracted by magnanimous ideas. They are especially more sensitive to the suffering of the poor and the lack of justice than any other age group. Aristotle codified the contrast between youth and old age. He found that the young have strong passions and are hot-tempered; they are also generous and trustful as well as courageous and open to noble ideals. By contrast, "the character of Elderly Men—men who are past their prime—may be said to be formed for the most part of elements that are the contrary of all these."⁹ Likewise, unlike older people, the lessons of experience, to wit, harsh realities dashing generous aspirations, have not yet hardened the young. While old people are wiser, young people have yet to learn how little reality and idealism make good company. The lack of such responsibilities as making a living and raising a family further assists the idealism of youth. Having not yet developed a vested interest in the social system, they can be easily fired up by revolutionary ideas, just as they can afford the risks of political activism.

Many authors have emphasized how the exposure of third world students to Western education greatly exacerbates the natural tendency of the young to assert their independence by defying existing authorities, especially parental authority. While in developed countries the young and their parents share more or less the same culture, in transitional societies the assimilation of modern education induces the young not only to adopt alien values but also to have contempt for traditions to which their parents are still attached.

This cultural dissociation gives generational conflict such an acute and distressing form that it pushes the young toward revolutionary ideologies. For what else could better express their aggravated rebellion than the adoption of ideas that radically question the traditional society of their parents?

That is why Lewis S. Feuer insists that youth idealism is not enough to explain the radicalization of student movements. A thorough explanation requires the addition of another motivation, namely, the conflict of generations. "The distinctive character of student movements arises from the union in them of motives of youthful love, on the one hand, and those springing from the conflict of generations on the other," he says.¹⁰ While enthusiasm, generosity, self-sacrifice—in a word, idealism—are features of a distinct biological stage, generational conflicts add the social component necessary to detonate the idealist impulse.

Granted the importance of sociopsychological, academic, and biological factors, the study of student radicalization must not lose sight of the decisive impact of social discontent. Commitment to a radical change of the social system is not intelligible outside the heavy presence of social problems. Even if we concede that radical groups are bound to appear regardless of the performances of governments, such groups remain isolated without the dissatisfaction of the majority of students with existing conditions of life. For instance, whatever be the part played by cultural crises, youth radicalization in the United States and France during the late 1960s would not have had the scope it had without the war in Vietnam and France's educational crisis. For radical groups to grow and assume the leadership of student movements, the disaffection of the majority of the student body is a necessary precondition.

Equally true is the understanding that, no matter how grave social problems are, radicalism is unthinkable without cultural dissension. When the issue is to explain the predilection of students for radical changes, and not their mere involvement in politics, the argument according to which the gravity of the social problems dictates the option for radical ideology does not look convincing. It presupposes a type of determinism that amounts to saying that the more acute the social problems, the greater the need for revolutionary changes. Unfortunately, important exceptions challenge this kind of assertion. Though social systems burdened with acute social problems proliferate in the world, revolutions are rare occurrences. Take the case of Indian students:

although the university student population was the most turbulent in the world, the student radicals do not as a rule make the structures of the larger society and of the university objects of a general critique. Indian student radicals declare no fundamental criticism of their society; they have no schemes for the reconstruction of their universities. They do take stands on public issues. . . . The Indian student

agitation is "occasionalist"; it responds to particular stimuli, local, regional, or national, but grievances do not become generalized and are therefore not persistent.¹¹

Given that extreme levels of poverty, further rigidified by the caste system, plagued India, a social situation more conducive to arouse indignation could hardly be imagined, especially among people exposed to modern ideas. Nonetheless, the highly muddled condition only provoked turbulent protests that, however intense and repetitive they may have been, fell short of developing a systematic opposition to the social system, still less of embracing a reconstructive intent. In light of the strong conduciveness of the social conditions, what else could explain the lack of attraction of Indian students to radical ideologies but the resistance emanating from the cultural sphere? The point is that Indian students did not develop a sense of alienation from their culture and tradition. Accordingly, they protested for what needed to be fixed or reformed without, however, harboring a project of total change.

To sum up, cultural factors as much as social conditions are necessary to foster radicalism. Statements assigning radicalism exclusively to structural conditions reflect a deterministic view that excludes the input of different cultural dispositions. The overemphasis on structural conditions forgets that social conflicts usually involve competing elites with specific agendas and goals. According to Charles Tilly, more than the antagonism between the ruling elite and the masses, what creates a revolutionary situation is the conflict between aspiring elites with dissident convictions and interests and the established elite. Rejecting the primacy that theories of revolution, such as Marxism and the theory of relative deprivation, accord to social discontent, Tilly's school of thought rightly emphasizes the impact of elite conflicts. He maintains that "conflict among governments and various organized groups contending for power must be placed at the center of attention to explain collective violence and revolutions."¹²

As expressions of political conflicts, ideologies do not simply crop up from structural conditions; they are strategies by which particular interests and beliefs compete for hegemony. It is not that the situation requires radical solutions; rather, radical solutions are necessary to enthrone special elites. The essential virtue of the radical ideology that is supposed to emanate from structural conditions is not simply to resolve social problems; it is to empower elites that have grown culturally sectarian or unorthodox. Because of their eccentric goals and values, such contenders do not fit in the system, however altered or reformed it may be. Political rivalries involving heterodox elites generate the conditions of social revolutions. What defines the case of India is precisely the nonemergence of culturally marginalized elites. The Ethiopian situation, on the other hand, set forth a political conflict between a traditional aristocracy and an educated elite that, on top of show-

ing discontent over the socioeconomic direction of the country, had become culturally alien.

Radicalizing Factors of Imperial Ethiopia

The factors that radicalized students in other countries were quite manifest in prerevolutionary Ethiopia. Thus, the birthplace and center of the Ethiopian student movement was the secluded and relatively autonomous campus of the then Haile Selassie I University. The suppression of freedom of expression and association by Haile Selassie's autocratic rule had turned the student movement into a representative of public opinion. Compared to other sectors of Ethiopian society, the university was a secluded place in which students had gained—after a bitter struggle, it is true—the right to create their own association, to hold meetings, and to have their own publications. Though such rights were precarious and subject to confiscation each time students concretely challenged the regime, they were nevertheless special treatments compared to the complete silencing of the rest of the country. Such rights, however shaky, were no doubt helpful both in facilitating the spread of radical ideas and generating a sense of solidarity among students. Moreover, as Haile Selassie was especially keen to give the image of a benevolent and modernizing monarch to Western governments and observers, he never launched the full extent of his repressive power against students, even when they directly antagonized him.

As elsewhere in third world countries, the learning process in Ethiopia had a deep alienating effect. Though Haile Selassie relied mostly on expatriate teaching staff of clerical extraction to temper the alienation, especially on Jesuit professors who could not be accused of sympathy for critical ideas, the very fact that the curricula and methods of teaching were squarely modeled on American universities exposed students to ideas and values that were on a collision course with the autocratic regime. What is more, instead of discussing and critically evaluating the radical ideas of Marxist-Leninist literature, most of the teaching staff simply ignored them. This academic censorship colored Marxism-Leninism with the attraction of the forbidden fruit.

The undermining effect of modern education was all the more corrosive the more the regime seemed saddled with an inner contradiction: the need to maintain traditional authority and oligarchic interests clashed with the image of a committed modernizer that the emperor projected of himself. The huge gap between the official discourse and the reality pointed to a blocked society in need of a radical reshaping. Though the modernist discourse of the regime gave prominence to the emerging educated elite, the political system exclusively protected the interests of an outdated landed

class. To many educated people, the system offered no other way out than outright rebellion.

In their attempt to decipher the causes of the radicalization of Ethiopian students, many scholars have overstressed, understandably, the impact of structural conditions. The economic failures of the regime led, they say, to the progressive disillusionment of students and intellectuals. This disillusionment took a radical turn when in the late 1960s and early 1970s acute economic crises affected all sectors of Ethiopian society, including university graduates, who suddenly found themselves threatened by unemployment. The economic hardships reached their peak with soaring inflation when in 1973 OPEC quadrupled the price of oil. In the eyes of most scholars, especially those using Marxist methodology, the frustration over these economic woes explains, for the most part, the radicalization of Ethiopian students. For instance, one student of the movement writes, "The prospect of unemployment shattered the aspirations of the younger generation of the intelligentsia, leading to a rapid spread of radicalism among the students."¹³ Let us review some representative scholars of this dominant trend.

The Evolutionary Approach

To account for the radicalization of the Ethiopian student movement, the Ethiopian historian Bahru Zewde suggests an evolutionary approach. The radicalization reflected, he writes, "growing impatience with a regime which was not prepared to reform itself. As the century wore on, the medicine prescribed also grew in virulence."¹⁴ While the early intellectuals adopted a reformist stand, those of the sixties and early seventies turned revolutionary because the delay of reforms exacerbated the social problems and induced the belief that the regime was completely resistant to the idea of even moderate reforms. With the loss of hope, there grew the conviction that the initiation of necessary changes required nothing less than the total removal of the regime. Some such awareness prepared the ground for the adoption of Marxist-Leninist formulas, all the more so as the long postponement of reforms so aggravated the contradictions of the regime that a purely reformist approach was no longer feasible. With the sense that the time for reforms had passed, the revolutionary option became hard to resist.

The problem with the evolutionary approach is that it does not seem to confront the real issue. To begin with, to speak of progressive radicalization assumes continuity between the reformist and the revolutionary stands. In reality, the use of different theoretical tools to analyze Ethiopian society at the time caused a break in continuity and led to engagement in a divergent direction. The difference between revolution and reform is one of kind, not of degree. And the shift occurred as a result of Ethiopian realities being read through a completely different theoretical model, namely, Marxism-

Leninism. This different reading, and it alone, explains the prescription of radical therapy. The error is to think that the accumulation and aggravation of social contradictions radicalized the students when in reality the adoption of a radical ideology altered the very perception of the problems. The ideology so affected the reading of the problems that they seemed to require nothing less than a radical solution. In short, what radicalized the movement is not exasperation in the face of the problems but prior commitment to a radical ideology.

Bahru himself seems to endorse the primacy of ideological commitment when, speaking of student publications on the national question, he writes: "Ideological authenticity or rectitude takes precedence over historical reality. The major preoccupation of the authors is not so much with what Ethiopia is as with what Marx, Lenin, and Stalin—particularly the last two—said. The cardinal importance of the national question is asserted in emphatic terms. The 'national question', we are told, is not to be dismissed as a secondary contradiction."¹⁵ In other words, facts were misconstrued in such a way as to justify the prior ideological stand of the student movement. Since Marxism-Leninism decreed that the national question was a fundamental contradiction, Ethiopian history had to be made conformable to the requirement of the theory, even at the expense of historical reality. Even Tigrean students declared Tigray a nation without any record of Tigray having ever existed outside Ethiopia. Clearly, the driving power of radicalization was less the lack of reforms than this prior ideological commitment through which Ethiopian reality was analyzed.

The writing style that was characteristic of student publications best shows the longing for ideological consistency. A cursory look at these writings illustrates how widespread was the method of dismissing opponents by means of quotations. A position is rejected as wrong if one shows that it does not agree with one of Marx's, Lenin's, or Mao's statements, even if it looked factually pertinent. Conformity to the doctrine mattered more than factual analysis and rational scrutiny. And as opponents used other quotations to justify their views, the dismissal by means of quotations could go on indefinitely.

The concern for ideological rectitude was so overwhelming that many students did not hesitate to imitate Lenin's style of writing. Bahru cites the case of Tilahun Gizaw, a famous leader of the movement, who "exhausts the repertoire of abusive epithets bequeathed by Lenin and Stalin in his efforts to annihilate ideologically the ESUNA leadership, which had dared to propose a different solution to a common problem."¹⁶ These attitudinal features clearly back the idea that ideological radicalization came first and then had its impact on the reading of Ethiopian realities. Hence the need to explain first the cultural conditions that welcomed the ideology of Marxism-Leninism before weighing the part played by social problems. ▀

The necessity of according primacy to culture sticks out as soon as we pay attention to the social origins of the revolutionaries. As was the case in other countries, in Ethiopia many radicals came from well-to-do families. As a rule, students coming from poor families were more focused on academic studies, which opened for them the path of social mobility, than were students from wealthy families. The number of radicals who belonged to wealthy, even influential families was so noticeable that Makonnen Bishaw, a moderate who was elected to the USUAA presidency in 1968, has said: "at times, it looked like that some of the students were being used by their ambitious families to effect some kind of a coup."¹⁷ The participation of so many sons and daughters of high officials of the regime in the student movement is believed to have tempered the violent response of the government, thereby encouraging the radicals to become even more daring.

Consider the creation of the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (Mela Ethiopia Socialist Neqenaqe), or MEISON, in 1968 at a meeting in Hamburg, Germany. In a recent book written in Amharic, an influential member of the organization enumerates twenty-five founding members all of whom had earned high university degrees.¹⁸ Among them we find neither workers nor peasants; and most of them came from well-to-do families, the only way by which they could have had the opportunity of studying abroad. Stated otherwise, the organization was purely a party of intellectuals from its inception and remained so until the Derg disbanded it. Now it would be difficult to attribute the revolutionary stand of these intellectuals to economic frustration since, however badly the Ethiopian government managed the economy, a bright future awaited most of them. Hence the inevitable question: if the case of revolutionaries coming from wealthy families does not involve economic discontent, what else is left but to look into cultural issues?

Ideology as a Derivation

Another Ethiopian scholar who tackles the question of the radicalization of Ethiopian students at some length is Tesfaye Demmellash. His finding is that the nature of Ethiopia's internal conflicts and the international context combined to make Marxism-Leninism appealing to Ethiopian-students. He writes: "Marxism appealed to the Ethiopian student intelligentsia not only because it contained a radical critique of both capitalism and feudalism, but also because it offered them, as no other indigenous or foreign intellectual tradition could, a different structural model of national development and an alternative conception of the good society."¹⁹ One reason why liberalism was not attractive to Ethiopian students was the aggregation of capitalism with feudalism in the Ethiopian context. The addition of a harmful international condition to the already aggravated social contradictions rendered the reformist approach irrelevant. Instead of encouraging liberalization by shattering

feudal institutions, imperialist capitalism so intimately coalesced with Haile Selassie's feudal regime that it offered no other solution to Ethiopian students than the adoption of the socialist ideology as the only means to get rid of both feudalism and imperialism.

To explain why Ethiopian students were attracted to Marxism-Leninism, Tesfaye adopts a typical *démarche*. First he posits the awareness of the problems and then suggests that socialism was adopted because it offered appropriate solutions. He never contemplates the possibility that it may have been the other way round, namely, that the prior adoption of Marxism-Leninism brought about the need for radical solutions—not that serious problems did not exist in Ethiopia, but another theoretical approach would have assessed them differently. Yet, that the ideological conviction was prior to the analysis of the problems is an idea that must have crossed Tesfaye's mind when he points out that many Ethiopian students of the 60s picked up their Marxism during their studies in America. They did not discover the theory in the course of their concrete struggle within the Ethiopian realities; rather, they brought it from outside. For, as specified by Tesfaye himself, the fact "that the ESM [Ethiopian student movement] had no organic links to broader social forces in Ethiopia, especially prior to the February Revolution of 1974, that far from forging such links it was only thinking and acting Marxism *on behalf* of the masses, meant that the movement's Marxist world outlook was a product of little more than pure intellectual construction and socialization."²⁰

All the defects of the student movement—such as extremism, dogmatism, and unrealism—point to an activism that a prior ideological conversion propelled. Tesfaye speaks of the adoption of an abstract position that "was not grounded in the historically specific contradictions, political traditions, and cultural practices of Ethiopian society."²¹ The term "abstract" does indicate the practice of using Marxism-Leninism as an a priori formula with which things must agree. The theory did not conform to facts; facts were conformed to the theory—that is, they underwent a characteristic reinterpretation that adjusted them to the dictates of the doctrine. To the interesting question why the Ethiopian student movement ended up in complete disarray, the best answer is that abstraction and dogmatism made Marxism-Leninism irrelevant to Ethiopian realities.

The Eclectic Approach

Another Ethiopian scholar who deals with the issue of the radicalization of Ethiopian students is Gebru Mersha, who was himself a former activist and leader. To explain why Marxism-Leninism exercised such a strong attraction on Ethiopian students and intellectuals, Gebru proposes an answer involving multiple causes. After reviewing some authors who dealt with student

movements, he concludes: "The radicalization of the intellectuals and their identification with the cause of the oppressed, especially in peripheral formations, stem from a set of interrelated factors: a relatively privileged position in society and their exposure to new and revolutionary ideas and their knowledge of historical processes, career blockages, their realization and disenchantment with the system and its corrupt political practices, its foreign domination, etc."²² The Ethiopian situation had added one particular cause of radicalization, namely, the Eritrean question, which Gebru characterizes as "possibly the major one," in that it "provoked students to raise one of the most sensitive political issues, the question of nationality."²³

Commendable though this pluralist approach is, it does not give a clear picture of the issues. Its essential defect is that it remains an eclectic approach that simply enumerates and juxtaposes factors of radicalization without integrating them into a whole. The lack of integration considerably decreases the theoretical significance of the approach, all the more so as none of the enumerated causes calls for radicalization by itself. As already pointed out, the delay of necessary reforms is not enough to explain radicalization. However delayed reforms may have been, a liberal solution was still possible. Scholars forget that the popular movement that overthrew the imperial regime initially expressed democratic demands rather than socialist slogans. The idea of socialist revolution came from above, especially from students and intellectuals. Even the Eritrean question had a perfectly liberal solution: the return to federalism and the concrete democratization of the Ethiopian state would have appeased the majority of Eritreans. There was no reason for students to radicalize over the issue of Eritrea unless they had already accepted the question as a colonial issue, which presupposed a Marxist-Leninist reading of Ethiopian realities.

Let no one brandish the argument that liberalism was more difficult to establish than socialism. Speaking realistically, socialism requires more material and intellectual resources and higher organizational ability than liberalism. Herein lies the major mistake of Gebru and also of many others, namely, the assumption that "liberalism as an alternative ideology did not have a strong material base and even as an incipient tendency was already discredited."²⁴ Was liberalism discredited because it was judged inadequate to existing conditions or was it so judged because students had already become Marxist-Leninist followers? The rejection of liberalism even as Ethiopians had no any experience of a liberal society suggests that the dismissal was *a priori*, doctrinal. Gebru's reference to the exposure of students to revolutionary ideas further confirms the primacy of ideological conversion. It asserts that Marxism-Leninism had become so fashionable that liberalism was rejected even before it was discussed.

In terms of undermining feudalism and imperial autocracy, liberalism would have, moreover, been no less efficient than Marxism-Leninism. A liberal

position can perfectly express social grievances resulting from lack of democratic rights, corruption, career blockages, foreign domination, and so on. As a country faces these problems, to the extent that it belongs to a lower stage of economic development, what it needs is a bourgeois revolution. Accordingly, a shift to socialism cannot be assigned to the effects of social problems: without the mental orientation that interprets social problems through the lens of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, liberalization would be simply the commonsense thing to do.

Gebru should have all the more prioritized the ideological component since he denounces the "revolutionary romanticism" of the student movement, together with its "crude and superficial digest of Marxist-Leninist ideas."²⁵ To speak of romanticism is to underline the detachment of ideas from Ethiopian realities. It also points to the main reason why the movement had to cede the leadership of the 1974 Revolution to a military junta: its inadequate ideological foundations, which could not have emanated from Ethiopia's objective conditions, did not allow the student movement to retain the leadership of the social protests. Since a consistent struggle for democratic rights could have addressed the social demands, the shift to socialism thus reveals an irrational inspiration that can only have come from idealization and the dogmatic reading of Marxism-Leninism.

Toward a Comprehensive Explanation

The Ethiopian scholar who, to my knowledge, has given the most comprehensive explanation of the radicalization of Ethiopian students is Addis Hiwet. After describing the attempt to explain the radicalization of the students in "psychological terms—'alienation,' 'moral distress,' 'moral crisis,' 'generational conflict' [as] all 'Catch-22 like terms,'" Addis lays out the social conditions in conjunction with the cultural component.²⁶ He thus mentions the cultural tension resulting from the fact that "the imported educational system was, broadly, at ideological variance with the ancient regime, the importer."²⁷ He also alludes to the impact of the global culture of revolution characteristic of the 1960s, which moved Ethiopian students still further from their native cultural ties. Summarizing the huge impact of this global culture of revolution, he writes, "*The Ethiopian radical intelligentsia was very much a political creature of the sixties—both in its formative consolidation as a caste and in its politicization.*"²⁸

Addis has understood that social conditions are not enough to explain the birth of radicalism. In addition to social determinants, we must analyze the cultural conditions that created not only a protesting intelligentsia, but also a revolutionary one. The situation must involve, to use Addis's felicitous expression, "a caste" determined to turn the whole system upside down. In a word, the explanation must be comprehensive enough to account for the

rise of a heretical elite. Only where cultural incompatibility develops together with social blockages do conflicts between elites cross the threshold of reformism and move toward social revolutions. It is imperative, therefore, to study the cultural dynamics that bring about the emergence of an alienated and heterodox intelligentsia. When members of an influential sector become adamantly opposed to their own legacy, they no longer seek to establish continuity by integrating the old and the new, the traditional and the modern. They want to erase tradition and build a new society. In thus calling for the eradication of the past, they pursue nothing less than a social revolution.

The Manufacture of Radical Student Movements

Understanding the accession of radical groups to leadership even as the majority of students profess moderate views is one challenge that scholars of student movements face. The Ethiopian case is no exception. Donald L. Donham posits fairly well the problem when he asks: "Why, at the outset, did a small educated vanguard in Ethiopia become so enamored of the notion of revolution? And why, in a matter of only months, did virtually *all* Ethiopian political actors at the center take up Marxism?"²⁹ Donham's questions amount to asking how radicals, evicting moderates, took the leadership of the social protest movement. Indeed, radicalization does not mean that the majority of students became ardent Marxists, but simply that they acquiesced to the leadership of militant Marxist students.

For the majority of students did not become radical; in fact, for many years the complaint was that Ethiopian students were unusually indifferent to politics. Witness the editorial of March 1965 of *Challenge*, the journal of the Ethiopian Students Association in North America, which complains as follows: "Ethiopia's educated youth, unlike those of other countries, has consistently failed to address itself to them [social issues]. Its history is not one of real concern for Ethiopia but a record of extreme individualistic egoism, opportunism and despair. It is a disunited and uninspiring body. . . . It is not known for an awareness of genuine nationalism like the youth of its generation elsewhere."³⁰ In light of Ethiopian students being so little politicized, especially compared to counterparts in other third world countries, we can appreciate the extent of the isolation of the few activists in the early years of the movement, but also the amount of work and dedication that they had to apply to finally politicize the majority. Needless to say, the repeated failures of the imperial regime provided a much needed helping hand to the work of politicization.

Data taken from various countries confirm that large numbers of students do not show an intense interest in political issues. In the end, however, such students often come to accept the leadership of organized and militant

groups. No doubt, campus seclusion, youth idealism, the spirit of solidarity, and peer influence enter into the rise of radical groups to leadership, but they do not fully explain it. Take the case of the May 1968 student rebellion in France: the majority of students progressively embraced what at first was the preoccupation of a radical minority. The main problem, in France as elsewhere, "is to explain why the protest of this minority was enthusiastically adopted by a large majority of the students."³¹

To understand why the majority of French students came to follow radical groups, one must refer to the predicaments of French society, especially to the crises of the educational system. France's elitist model of higher education was increasingly at odds with the growing number of students coming from lower-middle-class and working-class families. In consequence, the rising number of dropouts and unemployed graduates caused a deep anxiety among students, which resonated with militant groups' denunciation of the entire social system. The wide student revolt was therefore the product of the "conjunction between broad issues proposed by the radical minority and the diffuse dissatisfaction felt by the majority of the students with regard to the university system."³² Without the dissatisfaction of the majority of students, the radicals would likely have pursued their denunciation of the system, but only as a minority. The dissatisfaction of the majority enabled them to reach out by harnessing the crises of the educational sector to their denunciation of the whole system. This convergence of interests explains why the nonradical majority followed the radicals' leadership.

A similar evolution seems to have taken place in Ethiopia in the early seventies. Not only did the educational system become so dysfunctional that the number of university dropouts dramatically increased, but also the national economy's sluggish growth could not absorb even university graduates. Add to this major crisis the imperial regime's complete reluctance to enact reforms, and you will understand how progressively the majority of students came under the influence of the radicals, who wanted to destroy the system. As we shall see, neither the regime nor the university administration did anything to help moderates have some influence in the student movement. On the contrary, the way they handled protests and demands propelled the radicals to uncontested leadership of the movement.

That the majority of students, first indifferent and apolitical, were gradually drawn into militancy by radical groups, thereby giving birth to what can be called a revolutionary generation, allows the characterization of the generation as a manufactured movement. Ethiopian student radicalism was a product of social contradictions, but even more so of the input of radical groups who progressively politicized the majority of students. John Markakis and Nega Ayele describe well how in Ethiopia a few activists succeeded in fashioning a scattered, discontented social group into a revolutionary movement:

Students and teachers were extremely active agitating, pamphleteering, and demonstrating and provoking others to do the same. They infiltrated other organizations, and sought to influence their position injecting political elements into every conflict and sharpening contradictions whenever possible. Gradually they succeeded in focusing diverse grievances on the regime itself, defining it as the country's essential problem, and the formation of a people's government as the only real solution. "The root of such problems as corrupt officials and similar problems, is the system itself," averred one leaflet, "and the solution to them is a fundamental change of the system and the formation of a people's government."³³

The quotation clearly shows that as much as, if not more than, the objective conditions, the radical discourse that made the removal of social problems dependent on regime change is responsible for the politicization of the majority of students. Ordinary students complain about corruption, unemployment, the rising costs of living, mismanagement, and the like; the strategy of the radicals is to bring these students into thinking that these problems cannot go away unless the regime is overthrown and replaced by a socialist government. The objective situation is not enough to explain the revolutionary course; equally necessary is the exploitation of the situation by radical groups. Without the influence of the Marxist radicals, the socially discontented would not have abandoned the moderate course of reforms.

If the radicalization of student movements is largely accounted for by the capture of leadership by radical groups, how can one explain that a minority is able to defeat not only conservative students but also the moderates, who most naturally represent the majority? The allusion to a convergence of interests is not entirely satisfactory if only because it does not explain the sidelining of moderates. One possible answer is that the impact of the minority derives from its ability to express the hidden, unconscious desire of the majority of students. As Raymond Aron says, "In any historical period and especially in a revolutionary period, a minority may express the spirit of the time, may translate into actions the ideas or the underlying desire of a generation."³⁴ Even though revolutions are admittedly the work of minorities, the latter actually carry out what the majority secretly desires. This representative value largely explains the impact of minorities.

There is no doubt that the determined and protracted struggle of the minority awakens the majority to what it wants. But we must go beyond the role of awakening; we must speak of a formative role, which is often called indoctrination. More than the majority recognizing its desires and wishes in the activism of the minority, it is the minority that shapes the majority into wanting a radical form of change. The formative role of minorities attests that revolutionary movements are not the exclusive product of social conditions; the existence of revolutionaries who agitate and lead is equally important.

Of particular interest here is the question of how revolutionary groups emerge in the first place. Without doubt, revolutionary ideologies initially attract individuals "who may be motivated by personal psychological needs, life experiences, disequilibrium-induced tensions, or a combination of all these forces."³⁵ The introduction of changes through either internal evolution or outside influence always provokes a state of disequilibrium that favors the emergence of dissident views. Notably, changes entail a disharmony between the existing value system and the social environment. When there is dissonance between the value system and the social environment, deviant behaviors multiply at the individual level. While most people yearn for a resynchronization of the system, there are those who go over to rejection. Deviant behaviors can range from the spread of alcoholism, debauchery, and delinquent gangs to the appearance of new religious sects and dissident ideologies. Individuals who become alienated from their society look for a substitute in the creation or adoption of new revolutionary ideologies. And if, failing to reform itself, the society goes through persistent and severe crises, deviant groups find a suitable condition to spread their revolutionary ideology to other individuals and groups, thereby creating a revolutionary movement.

A word of caution: the reference to deviant behaviors does not mean that I equate revolutionism with alcoholism, debauchery, and gangsterism. What I want to establish is that revolutionary impulse appears in societies going through a severe disequilibrium, which is also manifested by unusual attraction toward extremist religious sects as well as by increased alcoholism and other asocial conduct. Needless to say, the difference between revolutionaries and the young people who look for escape in alcohol or drugs or through spiritual pursuits was that the former believed, even as they participated in the same malaise, that political action and change could put an end to the need to escape the gruesome reality through delinquent behavior or religious fervor.

The Emergence of a Marxist-Leninist Core Group

Nothing proves better the manufactured nature of radical opposition movements than the Ethiopian student movement. The case of Ethiopia provides a striking example of how successfully a small group of Marxist-Leninist radicals progressively extended its influence over the majority of students. The process started in the early sixties when a core of militant Marxist students made its appearance among the student body of Haile Selassie I University. Alienation from the larger society and the reading of common Marxist-Leninist literature drew these radical students together. Going beyond ideological affinity, they "formed a loosely organized society called the 'Crocodiles' " during the academic year of 1963-64.³⁶

The term "crocodile" needs some clarification. According to Randi Rønning Balsvik, the "name indicated its underground element, secrecy, and dangerous and unpredictable nature."³⁷ The mysterious nature of the group was such that some scholars doubt its existence while others maintain that it had 50 to 75 members. Obviously, secrecy was necessary for reasons of survival in the context of a highly repressive imperial state. But it also provided the group with a certain aura, all the more so as the early adoption of a radical ideology put the group at variance with the rest of the students. The term "crocodile" conveys the enigmatic and disquieting trait stemming from the ideological disparity of the group.

The view of political militancy as a profession or a vocation was the defining feature of the group. Fully adhering to the Leninist concept of "professional revolutionaries," the members of the group saw the university not so much as a place where one learns and acquires the skills necessary to pursue a professional career as a forum suitable for political agitation. It is important to understand that their militancy was derived from an ideological stand rather than from their own economic plight, obvious as it was that most of them joined the university because their families could afford it. To be sure, social problems had an impact on their ideological transformation, but the point is that a commitment of this nature is primarily made on ideological or moral grounds. As is the case with revolutionaries in other countries, the Ethiopian radicals represented "culturally alienated intellectuals—men and women of well-to-do families who had removed themselves from the orthodox stream of their society's traditional culture."³⁸ How otherwise could one explain their early adherence to the radical ideology of Marxism-Leninism and their systematic militancy? They did not turn to radicalism via an assessment of the unfeasibility of the reformist stand; they went straight to radicalism consequent to doctrinal conversion.

The formation of the Crocodile group in the university is reminiscent of the group that Mao Tse-tung created when he joined the Hunan Provincial First Normal Teachers' Training School. Mao writes: "Gradually I did build up a group of students around myself, and the nucleus was formed of what later was to become a society that was to have a widespread influence on the affairs and destiny of China."³⁹ Emphasizing their powerful and eccentric devotion, he adds: "It was a serious-minded little group of men and they had no time to discuss trivialities. Everything they did or said must have a purpose. They had no time for love or 'romance' and considered the times too critical and the need for knowledge too urgent to discuss women or personal matters. I was not interested in women."⁴⁰ At the age when most young men enjoy dancing and flirting and are busy planning their future careers, Mao and those who followed him exhibited the idiosyncratic behavior of shunning pleasurable and careerist pursuits. They gave themselves over to an ascetic life completely devoted to the revolutionary cause. Revolution was the ultimate goal for

which they lived and sacrificed pleasures and career. In complete agreement with Lenin, revolution had become a profession for them. It would be completely wrong to attribute this overriding commitment to social problems from which they or their family had suffered. Had adverse social conditions caused the commitment, it would not have developed such a systematic and thought-absorbing character. These were people who had become so obsessed with revolution that they had decided to die for it. If they had seen revolution as a means of defending material interests, their activism would not have been systematic, but intermittent and circumstantial.

A similar spirit animated the students who formed the Crocodile group in Ethiopia. Besides recruiting followers and criticizing the university administration and the government, especially for the imposition of policies restricting freedom of expression and organization, their main objective was, from the start, the creation of a strong and united student movement entirely committed to socialist ideology. They did not underestimate the difficulty of the task, but they saw in the seriousness of their own commitment the assurance that they possessed enough energy and single-mindedness to overcome all obstacles.

Conflicts between Moderates and Radicals

The triumph of radicalism in the student movement owes much to the steadfastness of the Crocodile group. A most memorable expression of perseverance is the protracted struggle that the radicals waged to create a citywide association in the capital by dissolving the practice of each campus having its own association. Neither the university administration nor the imperial government liked the idea of such a wide association. Alarmed by the prospect of radical students controlling such a large union, moderate students also opposed the idea. A referendum was organized in November 1966 asking students to choose between the existing campus unions and the citywide union. Its results proved that the proposal of a citywide union "was by no means generally supported."⁴¹ All the campuses situated outside the main campus called *Sidist Kilo* voted to retain their campus unions, while the majority of students in the main campus where the radicals were most active supported the idea of one union. Be it noted that the idea of one union also meant the replacement of the various student publications by one single publication, namely, *Struggle*, which as its name indicates, reflected the views of the radicals and already drew many readers among the student population.

Though the citywide union was inaugurated on April 7, 1966, the mounting opposition made the victory of the radical students precarious. Those who initiated the opposition to the citywide association and advocated the restoration of campus unions acquired the name of "restorers." There was also another group called the "Clean Sweep Committee," which while not

opposed to the idea of citywide union was determined to topple the radical leadership so as to cleanse the association of extremist views.⁴² As the fight intensified, a growing number of students came to support the restorers. What was at first an issue of efficiency and better organization turned into an open ideological fight between radicals and moderates. The restorers "strongly opposed what they understood to be a monopoly of USUAA by 'communist' interests and held that students with different views were 'systematically and consistently molested and ridiculed.'" ⁴³

As it became clear that the conflict between the restorers and the radicals was endangering the very existence of the student union, senior students proposed the resolution of the conflict by means of majority vote. The campaign showed a strong tendency to elect people who were free of ideological allegiance. One election poster of the moderates read: "We shall bow neither to the eastern nor to the western dogmas. . . . Ethiopia shall triumph! Ethiopianism prevail!"⁴⁴ Consequently, the seats of president and secretary of USUAA went to Hailu Mengesha and Mesfin Habtu, respectively, who had promised to promote trust and unity within the student body. In one of his speeches, Hailu said: "No problems could be solved unless 'our imported ideologies—ideologies which create division and hatred, disharmony and deterioration' were put aside."⁴⁵ The restorers' offensive had produced results: it led to the election of moderates. Another well-known moment that resulted in the election victory of moderation over radicalism occurred in the 1968–69 academic year when the candidate of the Marxist radicals, Tilahun Gizaw, lost the presidency to Makonnen Bishaw, whom the moderates supported.

These election reversals of the radicals demonstrate the existence of a split between moderate and radical leaders since the early years of the student movement. They also indicate that the split had widened to the extent that "the radicals were not unopposed on campus."⁴⁶ The seriousness of the moderate opposition underlines the obstacles that the radicals had to overcome to finally triumph and assume the complete leadership of the student movement. The radical orientation of the Ethiopian student movement was neither a spontaneous nor an inevitable outcome; it was the product of the hard work and dedication of a few revolutionary students. As a matter of fact, the ascendance of the moderates was never definitive nor sweeping. They did not succeed in retaining for long the leadership of the movement, still less in reducing the growing influence of Marxist-Leninist students.

The Victory of the Radicals

In order to understand how moderates progressively lost control of the student movement, let us consider the momentous demonstration of February 25, 1965, during which students marched in front of the Parliament building

and in the streets of Addis Ababa with the slogan "Land to the Tiller." According to an account of that demonstration, nine months earlier student representatives had submitted a moderate recommendation urging "the government to 'provide protection to the peasant by legalizing the contract between owner and tenants', form producers' cooperatives, and develop saving and credit institutions accessible to farmers."⁴⁷ The recommendation stressed the need to create a truly representative parliamentary system by developing democratic institutions. Not only were "the recommendations . . . made within the language of liberal-democratic capitalism," but in a move that betrayed a lingering confidence in the imperial institution, they were also presented directly to the emperor, who showed his appreciation for the students' concern.⁴⁸

Nine months later the University College Union issued a new and different resolution reflecting the resurgence of radicals. The institution of a contract between landowners and tenants was flatly rejected on the grounds that it would only perpetuate the existing system of tenancy. It was replaced by a radical option whose "main slogans were 'Land to the Tiller' and 'Away with Serfdom.'"⁴⁹ Unmistakably, these slogans announced the return of radical students to a position of leadership. What explains this return? The discussions in February 1965 in the Chamber of Deputies of a projected law regulating the relationships between landowners and tenants give the answer. The talks bore no fruit: "Pressure from landowning interests inside and outside parliament ensured that no vote was taken, despite the fact that the emperor was understood to favor the proposal, and Sweden had threatened to discontinue agricultural development assistance if it did not pass."⁵⁰ The blockage worked for the radicals, who had the easy task of convincing students that the imperial government and the feudal class were not willing to make even minor reforms. In light of this open reluctance to make the slightest change to the existing system, no other choice was left but to step up the struggle in the direction of overthrowing the regime.

The main reason why the moderates, who had the confidence of the majority, progressively lost the leadership to Marxist radicals is thus clear enough. The government's refusal to deal with the burning question of tenancy undermined the position of moderates in favor of radicals. Reformism would have prevailed if the government had supported reformist students by listening to some of their suggestions. Moderate leaders could then have argued that they were obtaining results, that reformism was the way to go. In rejecting even minor reforms, the government did nothing less than push most students into supporting the views of the radicals. With no reform forthcoming, a confrontational attitude supplanted both dialogue and constructive criticism.

When, on top of rejecting reforms, governments engage in a policy of systematic repression, the chance for moderates to retain the leadership of

student movements becomes close to zero. Of the Ethiopian case, Balsvik astutely writes: "The government might have been able to enlist a loyal opposition; moderate forces were still strong among the students. Instead, it rejected the contribution and exchange of ideas from those who thought it was their particular moral duty to speak out against injustice. Confrontation was inevitable."⁵¹ Even if students had snatched the right to have their own publication and association after a bitter struggle, the Ethiopian government displayed the pattern of closing the university and removing the recognized rights each time that students demonstrated over some social issue. Those rights were reinstated anew until a new demonstration put them again in jeopardy. This repressive cycle enabled the radicals to claim the situation was hopeless and that all forms of moderation were utterly inappropriate and inefficient.

In addition to blocking reforms and creating despair, a repressive state actually works toward the promotion of radical leaders. When, frightened by repression, moderate leaders leave the scene, radical students step in both to air demands specific to the student population and to spread their ideological beliefs. The withdrawal of moderate leaders confirms the extent to which repression cripples moderation. In the face of sacrifices and risks, the radicals have an uncontestable edge, given their initial commitment to the cause of revolution. The more dangerous the situation becomes, the greater is the prospect for radical students to come to the forefront of the struggle. Here we witness how political conditions can propel radical groups to the leadership of a movement that is composed in the majority of moderate students. As Misagh Parsa puts it, "Government repression may weaken or eliminate elite or moderate challengers and consequently polarize the opposition in favor of the hegemony of radical or revolutionary challengers."⁵² Repression does not create radicalism, which is always the affair of a minority and appears in conjunction with specific theoretical and ideological influences; but it opens the leadership of the protests to radical groups by effectively eliminating or scaring off moderates.

Concrete instances of Ethiopian government policy undermining the position of moderate leaders abound. Take the imperial government's Proclamation on Peaceful Public Demonstrations issued on February 11, 1967. It stipulated that no demonstration is allowed unless organizers apply for a permit a week in advance giving the time, place, and purpose of the demonstration. Naturally, "the students viewed the proclamation as directed mainly against their political agitation."⁵³ They discussed the proclamation in a general assembly meeting and, by a majority vote, adopted the resolution to stage a demonstration. The demonstration led to a clash between the demonstrators and the police and resulted in the arrest of many students. Students then refused to attend classes until every arrested student had been released. The government issued the ultimatum that unless students

returned to classes the university would be closed. Students rejected the ultimatum and the university was effectively shut down. The incident clearly shows what drove many students to side with Marxist-Leninist radicals. A reactionary law was promulgated that no reformist student could dare defend. The suggestion of the radicals to stage a demonstration emerged as the only choice left, even in the eyes of the moderate majority. The government's use of force and imprisonment to disband the demonstration merely shored up the arguments of the radicals.

Another representative case is the incident over the fashion show during March 1968. Organized by the University Women's Club and some Peace Corps volunteers in the main hall of the university, the show staged Ethiopian women students wearing the latest European fashion. Under the instigation of radicals, students protested against the spectacle, which they assimilated to "cultural imperialism" promoted by 'aristocratic Ethiopian women and American imperialism.'⁵⁴ Interestingly, the show became the occasion for male students to vent their condescending attitude toward female students. Linking the participation of university women to a lack of awareness about the detrimental effects of neocolonial influence, an article in *Struggle* bluntly stated: "Our sisters' heads have been washed by western soap."⁵⁵ Complaints about the low level of political consciousness of female students intensified. For instance, the radicals attributed the loss of the presidency of the student movement to female votes in favor of the moderate Makonnen.

To the disruption of the fashion show, the government reacted with its usual repressive manner. It closed the university, banned student unions and publications, and arrested student leaders and dozens of others. Yet, the fashion show was a cause that mobilized many students because of its highly nationalistic implication. Instead of supporting the students for their nationalist stand, the repressive response of the government allowed the radicals to portray themselves in patriotic terms, that is, as defenders of the national culture.

Equally supportive of the radicals was the inability of the imperial government to stick to repressive measures. It followed a vacillating pattern: a confrontation would occur over some issue, and the government reacted by abolishing already acquired rights and at times by closing the university. The tension persisted until the government presented conditions for the opening of the university. The university would reopen but the conditions were never applied. Finally, when the university administration backed down, the curtailed rights were restored. Both the reopening of the university and the restoration of rights invariably appeared as a victory for the activists, who thus became heroes. The implication of this enhanced authority of the activists was to consecrate confrontation as the only and right way to deal with the government.

One amazing outcome of the study of the Ethiopian student movement is discovery of the extent to which the imperial government was heedless of the consequences of its repressive policy. Though officials knew that radicals were leading the protest, they did not understand that a repressive policy was strengthening the radicals' hegemony, the reason being that repression was falsely believed to be having a discouraging effect. In reality, even moderates were increasingly attracted to radicalism the more the negative responses of the government convinced them of their own inefficiency. Engaging in self-criticism, many able moderate leaders joined the camp of the radicals.

I hasten to add that the repressive and conservative policy of the imperial government was just one factor, no doubt important, in the radicalization of students. There were other factors, mostly originating from an ideological commitment so absolute and categorical that it justified the use of any means to achieve victory. Let us come back to the incident of the fashion show. The hostile campaign that radicals initiated against the spectacle is best represented by the comment of an activist in *Struggle*: "How can a hall in our University, where our national culture is believed to be preserved and developed be used for girls strolling along showing western rags?"⁵⁶ Though the radicals had a low opinion of Ethiopian national culture, which in other writings they characterized as feudal, reactionary, and outdated, they used the fashion show to present themselves as guardians of the national culture. They knew the resonance that this cultural nationalism would have on many students and used it to boost their image among students.

Intimidation, name-calling, and even physical threats were, according to many prominent testimonies, among the methods radicals used to assert their hegemony. Faithful to the very style of Leninism, the radicals' preferred tactic was smearing their opponents. Thus those who held moderate views were characterized as CIA or government agents. And when smearing was not enough, the next step was the threat of physical violence. In the e-mail exchange to which I have already alluded, Makonnen Bishaw himself has confirmed to me that he had experienced firsthand this tactic when he was elected president of USUAA. He added that the pressure of intimidation converted some students to radicalism.⁵⁷ The method was apparently successful, as fewer and fewer students dared to challenge the radicals openly.

As I have noted, the radicals owed their ascendance over the moderates primarily to their ideological commitment. Again according to Makonnen, many students resented the radicals for their extremism, their choice of violent opposition, their rejection of Ethiopian traditions, and their support for Eritrean secessionist groups.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, the moderate groups had neither a clear ideology nor any rudimentary organization. They wanted change, but they did not articulate the nature of desired reforms in such a way as to really offer a viable alternative. It is no exaggeration to say that many students followed the lead of the radical group by default. No doubt,

the ideological hegemony of Marxism-Leninism in the sixties and early seventies greatly contributed to the victory of activists over moderates. The theory had become a fashion that spontaneously attracted many of the young and the educated in third world countries. By contrast, the moderates had nothing to offer that could counter the authority of Marxism-Leninism: liberalism and reformism were in theoretical retreat. Aside from the failures of the imperial government, the era favored Marxist-Leninist activists.

The absence of a credible alternative could not but present the moderates as disguised defenders of the status quo. The radicals had no trouble in saying that, though moderates spoke of change, what they offered was no different from the usual tired liberalism, which had so dramatically failed elsewhere in the developing world. The fact that many restorers were American Field Service returnees lent credibility to the accusation that they were propagandists of the American way of life. And since the U.S. government was a staunch supporter of the imperial regime, the enthusiasm of these former American Field Service returnees for American liberalism appeared to be at variance with their stand against the imperial regime. For students fighting the imperial regime, any allegiance to the system that supported Haile Selassie was simply contradictory and unacceptable.

A major strength of the radicals thus came from the nature of their ideology, which advocated neither the pursuit of compromise nor a wait-and-see attitude. On the contrary, as a radical opposition, it constantly put students in a position of confrontation with the hated regime. As such, it appeared as the only genuine and sincere opposition, as the only stand determined to achieve something. In addition to inculcating a combative mood into the student body, Marxism-Leninism armed students with a clear goal: to fight both the imperial regime and its imperialist allies. It also provided the ideological and conceptual framework by which students and the regime appeared absolutely polarized, just as it charted a confident course of socioeconomic development. Not only was Marxism-Leninism in great vogue, but also, as any doctrine propelled by social messianism, it inspired a bold and dedicated activism. On top of supplying a powerful tool of social analysis, its messianic inspiration filled followers with a sense of mission like no other social theory could. This sense of mission largely accounts for the boldness of activist students. Where moderates hesitate, radicals are ready to pay any price, make any sacrifice for their cause, including the ultimate sacrifice, and this degree of commitment has a magnetic power on students.

Unlike the absolutely committed activists, the moderates viewed political action as one activity among others. Not being as single-minded as the radicals, who had become professional revolutionaries, the moderates avoided a continuous fight; nor were they willing to use any means to triumph. Though they understood the need to fight the radicals, they did not wage a systematic and sustained struggle. Their involvement was intermittent, and

so lacked the methodical quality of the radicals' efforts. One reason the radicals retook the leadership of the student union after being defeated in the 1968 election was their sheer determination. According to Makonnen, once that election was over, moderates returned to their usual activity.⁵⁹ Their electoral victory was thus short-lived because a program of constant activity aimed at dislodging the radicals from all positions of leadership was not followed. The lack of follow-up allowed the radicals to stage their comeback and regain control of the movement.

To sum up, the victory of the radicals over the moderates, which resulted in the conversion of many students to activism, cannot be explained without the enthusiasm inspired by the Marxist-Leninist doctrine itself. To the extent that the enthusiasm fostered dedication, single-mindedness, and organizational ability, it is an essential component of victory alongside sociopolitical conditions. Add to this the fact that the university was in no position to provide any critical tools by which students could temper their enthusiasm for Marxism-Leninism. The complete absence of freedom of expression prevented the professors from engaging in a critical dialogue with the students. Granting academic freedom was, however, in the long-term interest of the government. When ideas are out in the open and debated, moderation and common sense can hope to prevail, as students become exposed to the pros and cons of any controversial theory. But when a theory is banned, as was Marxism-Leninism, in addition to having free publicity and drawing the attraction of the forbidden fruit, it takes the character of being true without any examination of its actual merits. If it is banned, so students say, it must be true.

Cultural Unorthodoxy and Revolutionism

We have already established that leadership by heretical elites is a defining characteristic of social revolutions. An account of social revolutions remains singularly deficient if it does not give an insight into the factors that produce such kind of elites. This study has already alluded to the presence of an unorthodox elite in prerevolutionary Ethiopia through use of the Leninist term "professional revolutionaries"; it also has referred to their uncommon dedication.

What defines such elites is the eccentricity of their values and beliefs. This characteristic isolates them from the rest of the society until lingering social dissatisfactions give them the opportunity to cast the social frustration in terms of their cultural eccentricity. When they succeed in seizing the opportunity, these elites rise to the leadership of social protests. To study revolutions is thus to follow "sparks across national borders, carried by small groups and idiosyncratic individuals who created an incendiary legacy of ideas."⁶⁰ The process of social revolution evolves as small groups composed

of eccentric personalities bent on secrecy and conspiratorial behavior progressively expand their sway. The case of Ethiopia reproduced this general pattern: we saw the appearance of a radical group named "Crocodile" whose essential characteristics were secrecy, single-mindedness, and complete devotion to the cause of the revolution. We also followed how Ethiopian social conditions and the repressive policy of the government combined to propel the radicals to the leadership of the student movement to the detriment of the moderates.

To underline the importance of the notion of unorthodox elite, it is instructive to discuss an article comparing Ethiopian and Nepalese students. The authors of the study, Peter Koehn and Louis D. Hayes, see striking similarities between Ethiopia and Nepal and their respective student movements. They also detect differences due essentially to Ethiopian students being more radical than Nepalese students. While Ethiopian students were committed to the violent overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of socialism, "during the same period, students in Nepal consistently supported the monarchy."⁶¹ The study attempts to explain this major difference.

Let us begin by establishing that students in Nepal and Ethiopia indeed faced similar sociopolitical conditions. Traditional autocratic regimes led by conservative monarchs exercising absolute power ruled both countries. The ideological apparatuses justifying the exercise of absolute power in both countries were also comparable in that they advocated the fusion of the political and the sacred: "In Ethiopia and Nepal, monarchical authority is founded on a long history of rule by royal families and myths of divine authority. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church affirms the divine nature of imperial authority. In Nepal, the king is considered a reincarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu."⁶² Moreover, both countries were not subject to prolonged colonial rule; nor did they receive massive amounts of foreign investment. As a result, they were overwhelmingly rural, nonliterate, and poor. Similarities are found in the educational systems as well. To train indigenous technical, professional, and administrative cadres, both countries gave great importance to modern education, which they tried to develop by appealing to expatriate academic faculties.

How, then, could so similar social and political conditions lead to such dissimilar student attitudes? Why did Ethiopian students challenge the legitimacy of the monarchy and opt for socialism, while Nepalese students expressed similar discontents but fell short of questioning the monarchy's legitimacy, limiting their demands to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy? To quote Koehn and Hayes: "What accounts for such divergent perceptions of regime legitimacy in similar polities? Existential conditions of poverty, illiteracy, and vast social and economic inequities are found in both Nepal and Ethiopia during the period under investigation. Yet, only Ethiopian students attribute these conditions to the political system."⁶³

To explain the disparity in radicalization, the authors review the reactions of the two regimes to student opposition. Thus, unlike the Ethiopian government, which opted for continued repression, the Nepalese government showed an "accommodative pattern of political control."⁶⁴ In addition to allowing students to demonstrate and protest, it agreed in principle with some of their demands, such as the establishment of a free press, the reform of the educational system, and the removal of the ban on political parties. Another important difference was the lack of marginalized ethnic or religious groups: "the discontent with ethnic, religious, or regional group progress manifested by some Ethiopian students was not an issue in Nepal."⁶⁵ Lastly, owing to the greater isolation of the country, Nepalese students were not as exposed to radical ideologies as Ethiopian students were.

Are the mentioned differences really enough to explain the greater radicalization of Ethiopian students? Surely, the less repressive reaction of the Nepalese government did not favor the radicals. The authors allude to the appearance among Nepalese students of radical groups that tried to assume the leadership of a nationwide strike of students over reform issues. During the strike, "ideological and revolutionary slogans were employed to an unprecedented extent. Violent police reaction to student processions resulted in many arrests and a new level of student radicalization."⁶⁶ However, following this escalation, something that never happened in Ethiopia occurred in Nepal: the student movement divided and, most of all, "when revolutionary slogans began to appear, moderate students withdrew support for the strike."⁶⁷ We must understand what caused the withdrawal of the moderates' support and why they were able to break up the student movement. That the Nepalese government was less repressive is not sufficient cause, since the withdrawal of the moderates' support occurred at a time of heightened confrontation.

The withdrawal of the Nepalese moderates expressed their commitment to reformism, that is, their enduring confidence in the availability of reformist solutions to the existing social problems, however severe they may be. What we need to understand is why moderation did not prevail among Ethiopian students. For we cannot deduce a Marxist-Leninist type of radicalization from the existence of grave economic, ethnic, and religious problems in Ethiopia, since students in countries with comparable problems did not go through a similar ideological metamorphosis. The mistake is to assume that the majority of the students became radicalized because definite and serious problems existed. The problem must be stated otherwise. Radical groups may exist always and anywhere; the question is under what conditions do such groups assume the leadership of student protests, thereby radicalizing the movement. Radical groups existed in Nepal, but the conditions allowing them to take up the leadership never completely developed. As

Koehn and Hayes noted, the majority of students refused to follow the course advocated by radical students.

What else could explain the attitude of the majority but the refusal to question the traditional legitimacy of the monarchy? Despite the accumulation of social problems, there was a threshold that the majority of Nepalese students refused to cross. Instead of favoring the radicals, the escalation of the conflict with the government set off the alarm of an irreparable polarization that most Nepalese students rejected. The disparity between Ethiopian and Nepalese students remains unexplained so long as we do not know why Nepalese students saw boundaries where Ethiopian students saw none.

In whichever way we consider the problem, the explanation for the establishment of boundaries points to the cultural disposition of Nepalese students. However appalling social conditions may have been, there never developed a large movement of cultural heterodoxy in Nepal. Accordingly, the conflict was confined to social issues; it did not spill over to the realm of values and beliefs. Had it done so, the need for total change would have displaced reformism. All the more reason to pose the problem in cultural terms is Koehn and Hayes's insistence that the main safeguard against the radicalization of Nepalese students was their commitment to the sacred legitimacy of the monarchy. Nepalese students refused the path of radicalization because of their religious belief.

In Ethiopia, too, so long as the religious justification of the monarchy prevailed, people blamed, not the emperor, but his entourage. The religious justification soon declined in Ethiopia, while it persisted in Nepal. Why? No social or political reasons can fully explain the decline since they were more or less similar in both countries. What then remains but the cultural difference? Put otherwise, the decline of the monarchy's religious underpinning in Ethiopia was the product of a change that occurred at the cultural level. So stated, the problem amounts to asking why Hinduism resisted better than Christianity, given that Ethiopia's revolutionary students came predominantly from Orthodox Christian families.

The reason for the weaker resistance of Ethiopian culture is not hard to find: because of a common Christian background with the West, Ethiopian students were more receptive to Western ideas, and by extension to Marxism, than were Nepalese students. Western statements and accomplishments did not appear as detrimental to Ethiopian identity. Not so with the Nepalese: being non-Christians, attachment to Hinduism meant the defense of their identity. While for Ethiopian students the West appeared as a developed form of what they are, as their future, for Nepalese students it meant self-denial. Hence the stronger attachment of Nepalese students to Hinduism, as opposed to the "tradable" religion of Ethiopian students.

For modern-educated Ethiopians, the West had already shown the right path by overthrowing monarchies, establishing republics, and instituting the

separation of church and state while remaining ostensibly Christian. This is to say that the introduction of Western education could not have the same impact on Nepalese and Ethiopian students. While in Nepal it provoked a reaction leading to cultural conservatism as a means of defending identity, in Ethiopia it stimulated cultural disaffection because the common Christian background could not but portray the West as the future of backward Ethiopia. There developed a cultural chasm between the modern educated elite and the traditional ruling elite the consequence of which was the gathering of conditions favorable to extreme polarization. The cultural divorce with the traditional elite left the rising elite in a state of mental wandering that made it vulnerable to the discourse of the radicals. With the multiplication of social problems and the intensification of repression, nothing was left that could counter the temptation of a total shakeup.

Add to this temptation the Ethiopian predisposition to messianism inherited from the Christian legacy. As will be amply shown in chapter 6, Hindu culture is less receptive to radical ideology. Because it does not place a great tension between the mundane and the otherworldly, Hinduism does not incite millenarian or utopian thinking. By contrast, the Christian belief more sharply distinguishes the temporal and the otherworldly. It hopes to resolve the tension when the advent of the kingdom of God brings about the final triumph of justice and freedom. The affinity that so many studies underscore between millenarian thinking and revolutionary ideologies of the Marxist type should enter into the explanation of the disparity between Ethiopian and Nepalese students. The Ethiopian cultural predisposition to revolutionary ideology is an important factor in the explanation not only of the emergence of radical groups but also of their greater ability—compared to Nepalese radicals—to attract many followers and assume the leadership of the student movement. Not that the majority of students really became radical, rather radical groups could easily touch a sensitive cord that facilitated their rise to leadership.

The upcoming chapters will study the cultural conditions that led to the appearance of unorthodox groups and the concrete process that facilitated their ideological hegemony over the Ethiopian educated elite. The process was complex, involving various mental outcomes in combination with definite sociopolitical parameters. The next chapter assesses the deep implications of the introduction of Western education in Ethiopia.