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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Africa Today*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Fall, 2008), pp. 3-32

Published by: [Indiana University Press](http://www.indiana.edu/~iupress/)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27666949>

Accessed: 10/05/2012 07:41

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A Millennium Democratic Goal for Ethiopia: Some Conceptual Issues

Maimire Mennasemay

This paper proposes an Ethiopian Democratic Millennium Goal that articulates freedom, development, and social justice. It examines how the conceptual stretching of democracy, nation, and civil society has created epistemic obstacles that prevent Ethiopian political thinking from pursuing such a goal. It proposes an approach toward a Millennium Democratic Goal based on an interpretation of democracy as a “form of society,” of “development as freedom,” and of freedoms as “capabilities.” It brings out the role of political society as the midwife of a democracy that Ethiopians can recognize as their solution to the political and economic riddles of their history.

Introduction

Ethiopians ushered in their Third Millennium on *Enkutatash*, Meskerem 1, 2000, as a people without the power to lead a life free from endemic poverty and oppression.¹ Ethiopia has been in a political crisis since the 1960 failed coup d'état against Emperor Haile Selassie. The Derg took power in 1974 and imposed a government whose repression led to armed resistance in various parts of the country, leading to its overthrow by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in 1991 (Young 1997). The TPLF reorganized the country on an ethnic basis and created an assortment of ethnic parties—the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)—through which it ruled the country (Pausewang, Tronvoll, and Aalen 2002; Tesfaye 2002). The ethnic politics of the EPRDF regime triggered resistance from other ethnic and pan-Ethiopian groups; however, the regime claims to be democratic and conducted ethnic-based, tightly scripted elections in 1995, 2000, and 2005, all of which it won. Nevertheless, its victories did not dampen the crisis, which erupted in mass demonstrations during the general elections of 2005. In response, it imprisoned the leaders and supporters of the opposition, and cracked down on pro-democracy militants, the press, and human-rights activists (Ethiopia Human Rights Council 2005, 2006).

Ethiopia's political crisis is embedded in an economic crisis. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2006), Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world, with 23 percent of the population subsisting on less than one dollar a day, and 47 percent on less than two dollars a day. About 78 percent do not have access to safe water and 87 percent do not have sanitation facilities, making water-related parasitic infections a primary cause of infant mortality, which, at 166 per 1000 for the under-five, is one of the highest in the world. Nevertheless, the government "manages to mobilize almost ten times more for military spending than for water and sanitation" (United Nations Development Programme 2006:62). Indeed, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development's 2007 Trade and Development Index puts Ethiopia at 114th, three steps down from its rank in 2005 (2007:25, 36, 98). In addition, Ethiopia is embroiled in a conflict with Eritrea and in a military intervention in Somalia, wasting its resources on wars. Ethiopia's future seems as dismal as its present.

That democracy offers a solution to the problems of oppression, poverty, and social injustice has been Ethiopians' hope since 1960; however, in light of the repeated defeats of this hope, what democracy means needs clarification in order to throw light on the actions that could actualize Ethiopians' aspirations for a free, just, and prosperous society. If democracy is the way for extricating Ethiopians from the present abyss, then one must take democracy seriously—which means going beyond the ritual of elections and tackling the political, social, and economic totality of the Ethiopian experience of destitution. One cannot respond adequately to the questions that arise from the history and life-conditions of Ethiopians without a democracy that integrates freedom, prosperity, and social justice. Since action without knowledge is blind, and since action guided by wrong knowledge is even worse, as the experience of Ethiopia demonstrates, we have to consider why Ethiopian political thinking has failed to throw light on the obstacles that bar the way to a better life.

One may adduce several reasons that could account for this failure. I would like to concentrate on one of them: concept-stretching. Recognition of the epistemic obstacles that concept-stretching creates, of the false understandings of Ethiopian realities it generates, and of the blind political alleys into which it leads, obliges us to search for an alternative. In the second part of the paper, I interpret, from the perspective of Ethiopian conditions, the works of Claude Lefort (1988), and Amartya K. Sen (1992, 1993, 2000a, 2000b, 2002), on the ideas of democracy as a "form of society," of "development as freedom," and of freedoms as "capabilities." Based on this interpretation, the paper develops an approach that makes comprehensive participation the "quilting point" of a democracy that integrates freedoms as capabilities, development as freedom, and social justice.

Ethiopian Political Thinking and Concept-Stretching

Albert Camus writes, “*Mal nommer les choses, c’est contribuer au malheur du monde*” (Boulouque 2004:46): “to name things wrongly is to add to the misery of the world.” Camus’ statement raises the ethical dimension of using concepts, a dimension neglected in Ethiopian and, indeed, African studies. The commonest way of misnaming Ethiopian realities is what Sartori calls “conceptual stretching” (1970:1034) or “concept-stretching” (1991:249).

Concept-stretching discards elements constitutive of the original meaning of the concept in order to make it cover more cases than the original meaning allows. The result is a thin conceptualization that provides “gains in extensional coverage” but generates “losses in connotative precision” (Sartori 1970:1035), making concepts vague and porous. Concept-stretching transforms differences of kind into differences of degree. Thus, it reduces democracy to electoral democracy, and the difference between an authoritarian regime that uses multiparty elections as a façade to stay in power—the EPDRF regime in Ethiopia, for example—and a regime of multiparty elections in which the rulers are accountable to the electorate becomes a difference of degree, rather than kind. Such a procedure “amounts to pure and simple terminological camouflage: things are declared alike by making them *verbally* identical” (Sartori 1970:1052).

Sartori criticizes concept-stretching from a perspective that calls for developing comparative empirical concepts through “a ladder of abstraction” (1970:1940). He fails to see the ethical point Camus raises: that to name things wrongly adds to the misery of the world and is therefore morally wrong. Stretching concepts such as “democracy,” “civil society,” and “nation” detaches them from the history from which they emerge and extends them to name Ethiopian social practices that exist against qualitatively different “background meanings” and “social practices” (Taylor 1988:15–57). The result is “epistemic violence,” the power of naming that doubles up as the power of silencing the historically different, which contributes to the discursive conditions that breed political and socioeconomic violence (Spivak 1994:76).

The Concept-Stretching of “Democracy”

Democracy has inspired political struggles in Ethiopia since the 1960s, but it has suffered from the contradictory ways different political movements have appropriated it. Many who claim to struggle for democracy have often massacred each other. In 1974, at least three major groups were claiming to pursue democracy: the Mela Ethiopia Socialist Neqenaqe (MEISON), the yālt’op’ya Həzbawī Abyotawī Party (IHAPA), and the Derg (Mekonnen 1985; Tiruneh 1993). The first two engaged in reciprocal assassinations. By the end of 1978, the Derg, claiming to institute “socialist democracy,” destroyed both MEISON and IHAPA. In 1991, a new regime, engineered by the TPLF, came to power, claiming to implement “democracy,” yet opposition parties

condemn it as an ethnic dictatorship. In response, the regime accuses the opposition of being antidemocratic and regularly throws its leaders and militants in jail.

It is instructive to look at these disagreements regarding “democracy” in terms of Gallie’s “essentially contested concept” (1968:157–191). According to Gallie, such a concept is open-ended, refers to an essentially complex activity, is appraisive, and is subject to modifications in light of changing circumstances (1968:161). The various parties put emphasis on different elements of the concept; however, to ensure that the debate between the protagonists deals with the same concept, a necessary condition for having “genuine disputes” (1968:183), the essentially contested concept must be derived from an original “*exemplar*” acknowledged by all the parties, as is democracy in the West (1968:165, 180). As a result, the competing uses of the concept enable “the original exemplar’s achievement to be sustained or developed” (1968:168). This is a crucial point, for it shows why democracy in Ethiopia is not an “essentially contested concept,” but a motley of borrowed concepts, and why the struggles over it neither develop nor sustain democracy, but lead to parallel monologues that conclude with violence.

Gallie’s exemplar assumes the existence of a shared background of meanings and practices regarding democracy, a condition that lacks in Ethiopia. This means, not that democracy cannot exist in Ethiopia, but that it cannot be simply imported as if it were a commodity. What Ethiopia has experienced since 1974 is a variety of imported exemplars of democracy. The Derg borrowed its exemplar from the USSR. Opposition parties, such as MEISON and IHAPA, borrowed theirs from the USSR or Maoist China; and the TPLF (the core of the current regime in Ethiopia) borrowed its exemplar, before its conversion to electoral democracy, from Enver Xoxha’s Albania (Young 1997:155). These imported exemplars are themselves the result of concept-stretching that has made democracy so vague that it covers the totalitarian regimes of the USSR, China, and Albania. Even with the demise of these exemplars, concept-stretching has not ended. It is now applied to liberal democracy, which is stretched to become “electoral democracy”—the “thin understanding of representative, liberal democracy that can travel across sociocultural contexts” (Lindberg 2006:21). The EPRDF regime has practiced electoral democracy since 1995, but the people are as politically, socially, and economically powerless as they were before its introduction.

The proliferation of pseudoconcepts such as “authoritarian democracy,” “limited democracy,” “restricted democracy,” “protected democracy,” “tutelary democracy,” and “virtual democracy” (Diamond 2002; Lindberg 2006:26) to describe regimes such as the one that now exists in Ethiopia testifies to the theoretical cul-de-sac that concept-stretching creates. Instead of recognizing that such regimes are not democratic, *ad hoc* concepts are developed in ways that are reminiscent of Ptolemy’s method of using epicycles to save theory in the face of recalcitrant facts. Concept-stretching promotes conceptual tourism and allows liberal democracy to “travel across sociocultural contexts” as electoral democracy, creating in the process a

democracy indifferent to social and economic injustices. According to Diamond, democracy in developing countries “demands that citizens *care* about politics, but not too much” (Diamond 1993:103, emphasis added), and that there must be “guarantees for capital on the part of the democratic regime so that privileged economic actors will have a lot to lose by turning against it” (1993:105). The result is the reduction of democracy to a procedure of electing representatives with no powers to deal with the issues of economic and social injustice. Concept-stretched democracy, in occluding social injustice, reduces democracy to democratic feelings, but democratic feelings cannot be a substitute for democratic relations.

The Concept-Stretching of “Nation”

Since the 1960s, the question of whether Ethiopia is a nation or a collection of oppressed nations within Ethiopia has dominated political debates, and the concept-stretching of “nation” has played a destructive role in this debate.

The concept of nation developed as Europe’s mode of self-understanding of its political transformations. The historical specificity of these transformations could be imagined from the fact that “political units in Europe went from some 500 in the year 1500 to some dozens by the beginning of the nineteenth century” (Schnapper 1998:30) and that during this period, Europe went through the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Thirty-Years’ War, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, colonial expansion, capitalism, and industrialization. Whether one understands the concept of “nation” in the Jacobin sense (as an aggregate of citizens), or in the Herderian sense (as *Volk*), it is a historically loaded concept, which cannot be used innocently to grasp the political identity of Ethiopians, or of the Amharas, the Oromos, the Tigres, and so forth, because these emerge from a history whose trajectory is different from the one that led to the emergence of the concept of nation as Europe’s way of self-understanding. Unless we consider the historical trajectories and self-interpretations of Europe as natural processes that are inevitably replicated everywhere, neither Ethiopia nor its constituent elements are “nations” in the European sense—and there is no reason why they should be, for there is no natural law that dictates that every people should have the form and content of “nation” in the European sense.

Yet since the 1960s, the idea of “nation,” pursued in the name of “national self-determination,” has been the source of “ethnic” conflicts. Since the historicity of the concept of nation has no roots in the historicity of the societies constitutive of Ethiopia, the “ethnic” use of the concept of nation is based on thinning out the borrowed European concept and identifying it with its mechanical dimensions such as common language, customs, and territory. The result is violence that, in doubling up as a negation of the historical trajectory of Ethiopia, generates conflicts. A telling example of this is Article 39 of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of

Ethiopia (1994), the founding document of the current ethnic federalism. It classifies Ethiopians as “Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples”, and defines these terms:

A “Nation, Nationality or People” for the purpose of this Constitution, is a group of people who have or share large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory. (Ethiopian Constitution 1994: article 39, section 5)

The Constitution imports the European concept of “nation” and stretches it to cover “nationality” and “people” such that these three terms have the same meaning, making them interchangeable and rendering the concept of “nation” vague and porous. Ethiopia has more than eighty recognized ethnies, and this kind of concept-stretching gains a pernicious extensional coverage, for every group can claim to be a “nation.” We are here engaged in violence that forces Ethiopian phenomena to submit to a definition that does not emerge from the workings of Ethiopian history. A destructive outcome of this concept-stretching is the loss of a sense of history and the gain of a euphoric attachment to ethnic roots, as one could see in the current transformation of group identities into impermeable moral and psychological boundaries, as if to compensate for the amorphousness of the stretched concept. Since the introduction of the 1994 constitution, Ethiopia has seen a resurgence of ethnic conflicts in the name of self-determination in various regions (Ethiopia Human Rights Council 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007; Gashaw 2006:84–98).

Undoubtedly, the idea of self-determination is crucial for Ethiopians since poverty, morbidity, unemployment, illiteracy, and powerlessness have mercilessly colonized their lives. If self-determination means being able to choose and lead a life of dignity, the majority of Ethiopians are deprived of the social, economic, and political conditions necessary to live as self-determining individuals. The concept-stretching of “nation” occludes this problematic and displaces the question of the individual’s self-determination to that of an abstract entity, the nation, whose conceptual currency in Ethiopia is the effect of the violence that makes the West’s history of “nation” the code for interpreting Ethiopian history. This process generates a distorted self-understanding, which, instead of mobilizing Ethiopians to overcome the colonialism of endemic poverty and oppression, diverts resources to a meaningless struggle for “national self-determination,” which transports poverty and oppression into the “new nation.” Eritrea’s “self-determination” and the implosion of its economy and the establishment of dictatorship illustrate the point. In diverting Ethiopians from conceiving a collective project of a democratic, just, and prosperous society, the concept-stretching of “nation” deepens their destitution.

The Concept-Stretching of "Civil Society"

The third bottleneck to thinking about democracy in Ethiopia is the concept-stretching of "civil society," a concept that emerged in the West as part of the conceptual self-clarification of the intricate relations among society, the state, and the capitalist market. The meanings given to civil society within the West itself are so varied that they make sense primarily in the historical contexts that gave rise to these differing meanings. The Lockean understanding of civil society as preceding the state, Montesquieu's understanding as internal to the political community, Hegel's understanding as a realm of universal egoism that needs to be guided by the state to protect the public good, de Tocqueville's understanding as associational life that serves as a bulwark against tyranny, and the Gramscian understanding as the sphere where conflicting forces struggle over hegemony, are all reflections of Europe's struggle to throw light on its own historical development involving the rise of burghers and autonomous commercial cities, the separation of church and state, the emergence of the capitalist market, the development of class conflicts, and the changing role of the state (Seligman 1995; Taylor 1990). Since social concepts, unlike the concepts of physics, arise from a society's reflection on itself in its quest for self-clarity, it is unlikely that the concept of "civil society" could illuminate the historically different social phenomena of Ethiopia where peasants and pastoralists constitute 84 percent of the population (United Nations Development Programme 2006).

A number of scholars question the usefulness of the concept of civil society in Africa. Mamdani considers its use as having neither historical nor analytical value (1996:13). Ekeh (1992) and Ndegwa (1996) question its usefulness for understanding the issues of democracy in Africa. In Callaghy's words, "civil society is . . . a metaphor masquerading as a player," for it cannot do more than "label . . . vaguely" important African processes (1994:235). In Ethiopia, the concept is stretched to refer to a multitude of disparate local, national, and internationally affiliated organizations engaged in poverty alleviation, health, education, HIV prevention, and so forth. It refers to professional associations, trade unions, human-rights advocates, and the like. Its amorphousness is so striking that one has to ask why it is so popular in the discourse on democracy in Ethiopia.

The popularity of the stretched concept of "civil society" owes more to the current neoliberal hegemony than to the pursuit of democracy. For decades, Western governments and private international institutions have been promoting "civil society" in Africa. A case in point is the World Bank. It has a policy on working with what it calls "civil society,"—local NGOs, community groups, labor unions, and professional associations (World Bank 2005). The goal is to foster the emergence of a market-friendly state. The stretched concept personalizes social injustice and facilitates the shifting of social responsibility from the state to NGOs and individuals and legitimizes the occlusion of the social question. "Civil society" in Ethiopia is thus primarily a site of palliative social care to the underprivileged, and is neither a

space of autonomy, nor a space of resistance of the underprivileged. It veils the political and economic roots of social injustice and contributes to the depoliticization of social contradictions. Commenting on the current vogue for “civil society” among foreign donors in Ethiopia, Rahmato notes that “The link between civil society and democratization . . . converges, conveniently, with the goals of structural adjustment programs supported by the agencies themselves and imposed on the countries concerned by the IMF and the World Bank” (2002:103–104).

That some Ethiopian organizations struggle for political and human rights does not mean that there is a civil society engaged in promoting democracy. On the contrary, “civil society” in Ethiopia is not antithetical to authoritarianism. As most of its members are engaged in palliative social care, which naturalizes inequalities, reduces the poor to docile subjects, and occludes the demands for a state that is responsible for social justice, they could function under any authoritarian regime. Indeed, the stretched versions of “democracy,” “nation,” and “civil society” share certain elements. All three ignore the state’s responsibility to social justice. In all three, leadership is personalized and centralized. The poor, who constitute the majority of Ethiopians, are reduced to being recipients of aid from civil society, to playing the role of voters in electoral democracy, and to being used as raw material for “national” self-determination. The political domain of Ethiopia’s elites has thus three sites: the state, the “nation,” and civil society. Electoral democracy, national self-determination, and civil society operate as coordinates of domination and mechanisms of exclusion of precisely those—peasants, pastoralists, laborers, urban poor—who, in Ethiopia, embody the condition of possibility of democracy.

Taking Ethiopians and Democracy Seriously

Unlike the concepts rooted in the societies that gave birth to them, the stretched concepts of “democracy,” “nation,” and “civil society” are not anchored in the history and background meanings that inhere in Ethiopian experiences. They are depleted concepts, lacking historical depth and resonance. As such, they cannot muster the utopian energies and imagination of Ethiopians and are incapable of enucleating from within Ethiopian history and life-conditions hope-mobilizing alternatives for the future. Indeed, one of the most deleterious consequences of concept-stretching is the excision of imagination and utopian visions from reflection on Ethiopian conditions, yet at least from Thomas More onward, including Marx and the current elaborations of neoliberal utopias, imagination and utopian visions play important roles in political thinking, in the generation of anticipatory concepts, and in disclosing the future as a “sanctuary of hope” (Bloch 1986; Bourdieu 1999). Not surprisingly, concept-stretching has produced dehydrated knowledge—knowledge with no roots in Ethiopians’ history, imagination,

intellectually and of inspiring them to overcome the present destitution. It imposes historical and cultural amnesia, deflates social hope, and diverts them from critical reflection to imitation, from an open future to a future foreclosed as a fixed menu. It expresses, and its continued use accentuates, the erosion of the cultural confidence and imagination of Ethiopians to conceptualize, understand, and resolve their problems through their own critical reflections on their history.

Criticizing concept-stretching is not arguing for cultural relativism. There is no doubt that the transformation of Ethiopia requires “context-transcending” knowledge that discloses the emancipatory alternatives capable of bridging the gulf between the present destitution and the aspirations of Ethiopians for a free, prosperous, and just society. But context-transcending knowledge can have transformative force only if it is anchored in the understanding that emerges from one’s own critical reflection on the emancipatory potentials that the past and the present harbor and from one’s capacity to exercise one’s imagination to envision a historically rooted alternative future. Without such an understanding, one is trapped in the depleted conceptions of democracy and development as engineering problems. The consequence is the occlusion of the alternative possibilities that inhere in Ethiopian history, life-conditions and social practices; and violence and failures are its inevitable outcomes. Violence, because the resulting impoverishment in Ethiopian political thinking reduces differences between political opponents into irreconcilable dichotomies, making violence the main method of settling political disagreements, even between those who claim to be pro-democracy. Failures, because one cannot successfully promote, even if one is competent and committed, a political and economic vision that has no roots in the history and life-conditions of a people. The lived experience of Ethiopians thus demands an approach that takes Ethiopians and democracy seriously. Consequently, this paper conceptualizes democracy as a “form of society” that enhances the political, economic and social “capabilities” of Ethiopians so that they can freely choose the kind of living they have reasons to value as a life of dignity.²

Democracy: A New “Form of Society” Where Power Is “an Empty Place”

According to Lefort, democracy is a “*form of society*,” a way of life characterized by a “set of implicit norms determining notions of just and unjust, good and evil, desirable and undesirable, noble and ignoble,” and not a collection of discrete institutions that one could borrow and use piecemeal (1988:2). It is a historically unique “shaping” of “human existence” that organizes social relations in a way that creates a new “space of intelligibility” and a new “manner of being in society” whose constitutive principle is freedom and whose core is the “*right to have rights*” (pp. 11, 37, 216–219). In this “form of society,” rights are not the dehydrated rights—rights drained of social and economic justice—of electoral democracy, for such a reduction conceives rights as if they were private properties (p. 30): rights are “relational,” an integral part of a “common world” (pp. 33, 49).

For Lefort, the novelty of democracy lies in the fact that power is “an empty place” (1988:17). Even though the people are the source of legitimate power, who they are, who represents them, and who speaks in their name are questions whose answers are neither definite nor uncontested. Consequently, democracy is a “theater of conflicts,” an arena of public reasoning and contestation, and as such, a regime “founded on the *legitimacy of a debate as to what is legitimate and what is illegitimate*” (pp. 5, 39). Democracy is “instituted by the *dissolution of the markers of certainty*” (p. 19).

Although Lefort’s conception of democracy as a “*form of society*” needs to be reworked in light of Ethiopia’s history, it nevertheless allows us to explore new avenues for rethinking democracy in Ethiopia. First, the political changes from the imperial to the Derg and then to the EPRDF regime have not been transitions from “forms of society” with no rights to “forms of society” expressive of the “right to have rights.” The difference between the Derg, which did not practice electoral democracy, and the EPRDF, which practices electoral democracy, is not a difference of “form of society,” but of rhetoric and of the masks that arbitrary power wears. The Derg used the rhetoric of “class” and the mask of “socialist democracy,” and the EPRDF uses the mask of “ethnic self-determination” and the rhetoric of “revolutionary democracy.” The Derg used “class” and the EPRDF “ethnicity” as “markers of certainty” that index as illegitimate any questioning of the respective regimes’ orientations. In both regimes, political, social, and economic violence are the main instruments of governance. There is no space for public reasoning and contestation; and the site of power is the person in power—Mengestu or Meles.

Second, from the considerations that rights are relations that create a democratic common world whose core is the “right to have rights,” one could enucleate the idea that the first “right” in the “right to have rights” points to a form of society wherein the “rights” in “to have rights” are effective. That is, rights are “relational,” an integral part of a “common world” and express “a manner of being in society.” Individual victims of arbitrary power who have no choice but to starve, to die prematurely, to be illiterate, to be poor, cannot be said to have the right to have rights, since they cannot choose a life wherein they have the freedom to avoid starvation, premature death, arbitrary arrests and persecutions, pandemic diseases, illiteracy, and so forth. If the right to have rights is the core of democracy, then, democracy in Ethiopia cannot be dissociated from the removal of the political, economic and social conditions that prevent Ethiopians from effectively enjoying the right to avoid political, social, and economic deprivations.

Lefort’s conception of democracy as a form of society needs to be reworked in order to grasp adequately the economic and social questions that Ethiopian history and life-conditions generate. Lefort considers democracy only in the realm of the political (1988:45–55). Nevertheless, his rejection of rights as “private property” and his conception of rights as “relational” and constitutive of a “common world” help to see why the dehydrated rights that inform concept-stretched democracy are inadequate to meet the demands for

socioeconomic justice, which permeate everyday life in Ethiopia. His critical perspective on the interrelationship between experiencing and studying society makes it possible to rework the conception of a “form of society” in a way that shows the relevance of democracy to economic and social experiences. Lefort criticizes “political sociologists and scientists” for forgetting that one’s experience of society is prior to the identification of the constituent elements of society and that “any system of thought that is bound up with any form of social life is grappling with a subject-matter which contains within it its own interpretation” (1988:10, 12). From this hermeneutical perspective, an individual experiences society primarily as a meaningful whole, and not as a disparate collection of disconnected facts and events. This means that Ethiopians experience their life-conditions as a totality characterized by hunger, premature mortality, illiteracy, arbitrary power, and poverty, prior to the disaggregation of this lived experience into political, economic, and social components. Nor is their lived experience mute. It articulates its own web of meanings rooted in the experience of society as a totality before it is broken down into political, economic, and social aspects. This experience has to be apprehended comprehensively in order to grasp the questions and aspirations that inform the lived experience of Ethiopians.

An interpretative approach anchored in this lived experience indicates that democracy cannot be limited to electoral practices. When it is so limited, the lived experiences of social and economic deprivations that are integral to peoples’ lives are torn out, disaggregated, and recast as technical issues for experts or as problems for the market. The interpretative approach overcomes such a fragmentation of lived experience and opens the door to a conceptualization of democracy that makes sense to Ethiopians themselves as their victory over the forces that prevent them to lead a life of dignity. Such a conceptualization of democracy is possible through a cross-fertilization of Lefort’s idea of democracy as a “form of society” with Sen’s “capabilities approach” (1992, 1993, 2000a). The cross-fertilization between these two is possible, because both approaches are rooted in the notion of agency freedom, providing a common ground for their mutual articulation.

Democracy: A New “Form of Society” Rooted in “Capabilities”

Sen approaches freedoms as “capabilities” and “development as freedom” (Sen 2000a). Conjugated with Lefort’s idea of democracy as a “form of society,” Sen’s approach offers a way for conceiving democracy as a “form of society” that articulates freedom, development, and social justice as its constitutive practices. Unlike “development” theories, which reflect a teleological reading of the West’s history, Sen’s approach is rooted in the issues of “unfreedoms” in poor countries (Sen 2000a:xii), yet not much reflection has been devoted to it in Ethiopian and, indeed, African studies. I here present the main ideas of the approach and articulate them with the idea of democracy as a “form of society,” all from the perspective of Ethiopian conditions.

Sen conceives “development as freedom” and argues that “Development consists of the removal of the various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency” (2000a:xii). His recasting of “development as freedom” could be seen as a critique of the hegemonic concept of “development,” which, in a way similar to concept-stretching of democracy, evacuates substantive freedoms from development.³ He articulates the internal relations between freedoms and development in terms of the quasi-Aristotelian (human flourishing) concepts of “capabilities” and “functionings” (1993:30–54; 2000a:73–75). “Functionings,” he writes, “reflects the various things a person may value doing or being,” whereas “A person’s ‘capability’ refers to the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve” (2000a:75). Capability is thus “the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations” (2000a:75). Functionings refer to what a person actually does and is: keeping oneself healthy, nourished, educated, active in the community, and so forth. Capabilities refer to the various combinations of functionings that a person actually can choose from to be and to do in order to lead a life of dignity. The current functionings and the ensemble of alternative functionings from which a person could choose from make up the person’s “capability set,” that is “the person’s freedom to choose from possible livings” (Sen 1992:40). Capability “identifies the real alternatives we have” (1992:49). To adapt Sen’s example, the Ethiopian on a hunger strike protesting human-rights violations and the Ethiopian in Wollo dying from starvation have different capability sets, for “the first *can* choose to eat well . . . in a way the second cannot” (2000a:75).

Capability is a complex normative concept, which refers to both agency and well-being, each of which is articulated in terms of freedom and achievement. According to Sen, a person is an agent in the sense that he/she is “someone who acts and brings about change” (2000a:19). Agency achievement “refers to the realization of goals and values” a person “has reasons to pursue,” and agency freedom is “one’s freedom to bring about the achievements one values and which one attempts to produce” (Sen 1992:57). Likewise, well-being has an achievement and freedom dimension. Well-being achievements are the achieved functionings such as “being well-nourished, being adequately clothed and sheltered, avoiding preventable morbidity . . . taking part in the life of the community, being able to appear in public without shame, and so on” (1992:110). Well-being freedoms are “substantive freedoms,” which include the capabilities to avoid deprivations such “as starvation, undernourishment, escapable morbidity and premature mortality, as well as the freedoms that are associated with being literate and numerate, enjoying political participation” (2000a:36). Development involves expansion of these and other freedoms. Sen gives two reasons to justify the conception of development as freedom: (a) “*the evaluative reason*,” assessing progress primarily in terms of whether the freedoms that people have are enhanced; (b) “*the effectiveness reason*,” the effective exercise of the free agency of people in the achievement of development (2000a:4). Thus,

unlike the conceptualization of development in “development theories,” the capabilities approach espouses the “expansion of freedom” as both “the primary end” and “the principal means of development” (2000a:36). The effective freedoms available to individuals are the primary criteria for evaluating social, economic and political arrangements (1992:49–53).

The internal connections Sen establishes among development, freedoms, and capabilities could be fruitfully articulated with Lefort’s conception of rights as “relational” and constitutive of a “common world” and of power as “an empty place” for conceptualizing democracy as a “form of society” that integrates freedom, economic development, and social justice. From the capabilities perspective, it is misleading to consider poverty, hunger, illiteracy, unemployment, morbidity, and so forth, primarily in terms of lack of resources (1992:29–33, 81–110). True, lack of resources is part of the problem, but as Lefort indicates, an authoritarian government could also see these afflictions in the same term—as lack of resources, and take “countless measures concerning employment, public health, education, housing” to respond to this lack without increasing the freedoms of individuals (1988:37). To avoid authoritarian resolutions of these problems, one must conceive them as capabilities deprivations—as “unfreedoms.” Development is, then, the removal of political, economic, and social unfreedoms achieved through the agency of the very persons who suffer from capability deprivations (Sen 2000a:18–19, 38–41).

Sen has a thick conception of freedom. Unlike the liberal idea of negative liberty that reduces freedom to noninterference, he considers freedom as the positive power to create conditions that enhance capabilities. He makes the point that “a *counterfactual choice*—what one would have chosen if one had the choice—is relevant to one’s freedom” (1992:67). Thus, if a government eradicates malaria, something “one would have chosen if one had the choice,” it enhances the individual’s effective freedom to live as he/she would choose. According to Sen, agency freedom and social arrangements are deeply connected, and consequently, the state has a positive role in creating conditions that enhance capabilities (2000a:282–298). Concept-stretched democracy has no place for such a positive conception of the state. This positive conception does not lead to a state that overwhelms the individual—a concern of the partisans of negative liberty, if it is articulated with Lefort’s idea of the emptiness of the place of power that makes public reasoning and contestation a constitutive element of democracy. The articulation of Sen’s capabilities approach and Lefort’s conception of democracy as a form of society makes agency freedom the “quilting point” that integrates freedom, development, and social justice as the necessary fabrics of democracy.

Agency freedom, understood in the above sense, makes the distinction that Sen makes between “culmination” and “comprehensive” outcomes (2000a:27) a crucial criterion for evaluating political, social, and economic arrangements. Culmination outcomes consider only final results, without taking into account the exercise of freedom in the process of getting there, whereas comprehensive outcomes include the exercise of freedom through

which the outcomes are reached and take into account the “ends that people have reason to pursue” and “the freedoms to be able to satisfy these needs” (2000a:90). The notion of comprehensive outcomes provides new coordinates for rethinking the issue of development. The hegemonic understanding of “development” confines development to culmination outcomes and ignores comprehensive outcomes—freedom as both the means and the end of development. This hegemonic concept of development informs the Millennium Development Goals to which Ethiopia subscribes (UN Millennium Project 2005).

The Millennium Development Goals identify poverty as a lack of resources and conceives its solution in terms of culmination outcomes, dubbed “poverty reduction,” which rectify this lack. Sachs, the director of the UN Millennium Project, writes that the goal of poverty reduction “is to end *extreme* poverty, not to end all poverty, and still less to equalize world incomes or to close the gap between the rich and the poor” (Sachs 2005:289). Nowhere in the Millennium Development Goals or in Sachs’s discussion is poverty conceived as the effect of unfreedoms, nor is poverty reduction considered as an integral part of the process of the construction of a free, just, and prosperous society through the exercise of the agency freedom of the poor themselves; rather, poverty reduction is conceived as a technical matter, conceptualized by experts, and implemented by those in power (Sachs 2005:74–89, 244–287). The poor are treated primarily as creatures of needs, not as agents who could transform society and their manner of being in society. Indeed, as conceived in the Millennium Development Goals, poverty reduction is a goal authoritarian regimes could embrace since they too define development in terms of culmination outcomes and discount the importance of freedom as a means to and an end of development.

The Millennium Development Goals approach cannot fulfill Ethiopian aspirations any more than previous “developmental” projects have done, because it fails to recognize the lived experience of Ethiopians. As discussed earlier, Ethiopian life-conditions constitute a totality characterized by political, economic, and social powerlessness. Poverty is one outcome of this totality; others are authoritarianism, social, and economic exclusions, the violation of rights, ethnic conflicts, political violence, dependence on external aid, and so forth. This totality is what one could call “poor living” (Sen 2000b:3–4). Its constitutive elements are political, economic, and social unfreedoms. The core Ethiopian problematic is not then poverty, but poor living: a life crippled by political, economic, and social powerlessness, depriving Ethiopians of the capabilities vital for leading a life of dignity. Only if one starts from the perspective of this totality, could one grasp why democracy that articulates internally “development as freedom,” freedoms as “capabilities,” and social justice is the only adequate response to the questions that arise from the lived conditions of Ethiopians. This means that the problematic of poor living has to replace that of poverty. Otherwise, poverty reduction, being limited to culmination outcomes, will leave Ethiopians trapped in poor living indefinitely. Indeed, there is an elective affinity

between the Millennium Development Goals and the stretched conceptions of democracy, nation, and civil society. They all exclude the issues of social justice, substantive freedoms, and prosperity.

Poor Living, Structural Change, and Agency Freedom

Given the emphasis on agency freedom in the articulation of “capabilities” and democracy as a “form of society,” one may object that poor living is a structural issue, and that therefore it needs a structural solution that the emphasis on agency freedom cannot provide (Stewart and Deneulin 2002:61–70). The capabilities approach does not disregard the importance of structures for overcoming poor living; however, it points out that a structural change that considers individuals as raw material for building a “better” society cannot offer an alternative solution to injustice, because, in the process of being “liberated,” individuals are objectified and lose their freedoms (Sen 2000a:35–53; Lefort 1988:232–233). Still, Sen emphasizes the importance of institutions for enhancing capabilities and notes that individuals “live and operate in a world of institutions” and that “opportunities and prospects depend crucially on what institutions exist and how they function” (Sen 2000a:142). Institutions are nonetheless evaluated in the light of their contributions to freedoms—which means that actions against structural injustice should not be carried out at the expense of the right of individuals to lead a life of dignity. Sen quotes Karl Marx to make the point: “What has to be avoided above all is the reestablishing of ‘Society’ as an abstraction vis-à-vis the individual” (Sen 2002:81). Such an abstraction involves reducing individuals to a single dimension—say, “only as workers, and nothing more is seen in them, everything else being ignored” (Marx, quoted in Sen 2002:81). This kind of reductionism characterizes political changes in Ethiopia since 1974. Those in power reduce Ethiopians to a single dimension, such as “class” or “ethnie,” and treat them “only” as such to build “socialist democracy” (the Derg) or “ethnic democracy” (the EPRDF). The alternative structures that these regimes create replicate the unfreedoms of the regimes they claim to reject. As Sen points out, “The achievement of social justice depends not only on institutional forms (including democratic rules and regulations)” but on the effective capabilities enhancements they deliver (2000a:159).

Overcoming poor living requires that we see structural injustice in terms of inequality of freedoms and not only, as liberal democracy does, in terms of resource inequality (Drèze and Sen 2002:323). Equalizing resources does not mean equality in the substantive freedoms enjoyed by different persons, for resource equality could coexist with inequalities in actual freedoms due to differing “conversion” factors, such as differences in personal, social, and environmental characteristics (Sen 1992:81–82, 149; 2000a:70–74). A pastoralist in the Ogaden, a pregnant woman in Jimma, a child in Nekemte, a farmer in Selale, a housewife in Gondar, an unemployed youth in Desse,

or a worker in Addis Ababa could convert equal resources in ways that could lead to inequalities.

Economic inequality is a more inclusive—far larger—concept than mere income inequality, and inequality in the fuller sense goes beyond economic inequality, no matter how broadly the latter may be defined. There are many economic determinants, other than income, of well-being, freedom and power, and there are social factors—distinct from purely economic ones—that influence inequality between persons and groups. (Drèze and Sen 2002:353).

Eliminating inequalities of freedoms—of capabilities—is what overcomes poor living in structural and individual senses. As I discuss below, the process for reaching this goal is comprehensive participation.

A related issue here is what La Boétie calls “voluntary servitude”—the behavior of a person “who gives consent to [his/her] own misery, or, rather, apparently welcomes it” (1975:50). An aspect of poor living in Ethiopia is the participation of many individuals in their own oppression in the name of traditions, kinship, and clan and ethnic solidarities. It is thus important to raise the question of whether “voluntary servitude” undermines the notion of agency freedom central to a democracy that articulates internally freedom, development and social justice. Not necessarily! Actions that reinforce one’s own subjection are mostly outcomes of decades of oppression. Unlike concept-stretched democracy, nation and civil society, which hardly take into account the deleterious effects of adaptation to oppression and consider elections, national self-determination, and civil society as miraculous cures that abolish voluntary servitude, the capabilities approach recognizes voluntary servitude as a deprivation that is as real as hunger and disease. “Deprived people,” Sen writes, “tend to come to terms with their deprivation because of the sheer necessity of survival, and they may, as a result . . . adjust their desires and expectations to what they . . . see as feasible” (2000a:63). If “social conditioning” makes a person “too subdued or broken” to desire much, and makes him/her develop “adaptive preferences,” then it would be unjust to consider the preferences of such a person as outcomes of a free choice (1992:149–150). Those who adopt concept-stretched democracy, nation, and civil society espouse a utilitarian stand and equate well-being with a state of satisfaction that reflects adaptive preferences. They thus reinforce poor living, rather than overcome it. The cure for adaptive preferences is neither neglect nor paternalism, but more freedom through the creation of a democracy based on self-organization and active participation.

Poor Living, Comprehensive Participation, and Democracy

The overwhelming hegemony of neoliberalism, which considers the global market as if it were the source of the “general will,” makes the search for an alternative democratic order difficult. As Browne points out, what is “surprising about the so-called third wave transition to democracy” is its subordination to the single model of “liberal democracy,” as compared to the wealth of “political experimentation” that characterized democratic development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (2006:46–47). The question we confront is: how can Ethiopians rescue their political imagination from the hegemony of neoliberalism to see an alternative democratic order responsive to their aspirations to overcome poor living? Practically, this means asking two questions. The first is: who are the people in Ethiopia who have least assimilated the hegemonic values of neoliberalism and are thus open to an alternative democratic vision that articulates internally freedom, prosperity and social justice? Without doubt, it is the peasants, the pastoralists, the urban poor, and the excluded in general—precisely the category of people who suffer from capabilities deprivations. The quest for democracy must then include the active participation of these groups. The second question is: what kind of alternative to liberal democracy is implied by a conception of democracy as a “form of society” that articulates internally, development as freedom, freedoms as capabilities, and social justice? The answer points to a democracy of “comprehensive outcomes” as opposed to liberal democracy.

An example from Sen demonstrates the difference between these kinds of democracy. Sen draws our attention to the “deprivation in health care, education, and social environment of African Americans,” which makes “their mortality rates exceptionally high,” compared to inhabitants in Sri Lanka, and parts of India and China, who have lower rates of premature mortality, though the latter have lower incomes and less resources than African-Americans (2000a:6, 21–24, 96, 108), but they have more freedom than African-Americans not to die prematurely. The lesson is that democracy that articulates development as freedom, freedoms as capabilities, and social justice is feasible only by “shifting attention away from the *means* (and one particular means that is usually given exclusive attention, viz., income) to *ends* that people have reason to pursue, and, correspondingly, to the *freedoms* to be able to satisfy these ends” (Sen 2000a:90). Sen observes, “Democracy does not serve as an automatic remedy of ailments as quinine works to remedy malaria” (Sen 2000a:155). If the richest liberal democracy cannot cope with social injustice, it can be argued that concept-stretched democracy cannot solve the incomparably graver issues of social injustice in Ethiopia.

I call a “democracy of ends” the “form of society” that emerges from the internal articulation of development as freedom, freedoms as capabilities, and social justice. The goal of such a democracy is to overcome poor living through the self-organization and active participation of those who

suffer from capabilities deprivations in the resolution of their political, economic, and social problems. The “freedom to participate in critical evaluation and in the process of value formation is among the most crucial freedoms of social existence,” and the conceptualization of needs and social values “cannot be settled merely by the pronouncements of those in authority” (Sen 2000a:287), or by the market. Indeed, the “intensity of economic needs,” such as the one we find in Ethiopia, adds to the “urgency” of participation (2000a:148).

To bring about a democracy of ends, participation must be a bottom-up, deep, and wide process, which institutionalizes public reasoning and contestation for formulating policies and making decisions about political, economic, and social issues. It establishes a bottom-up flow in (a) identifying problems, (b) setting the agenda for discussion, (c) determining the rules for making decisions, (d) formulating policies, (e) making decisions, and (f) distributing tasks and responsibilities. This approach is the only one that is consistent with the idea that agency and well-being freedoms and achievements are actualized only when the underprivileged participate in the formulation and determination of the policies and actions that contribute to the enhancement of their capability sets. In transforming the capabilities deprivations of the poor and the oppressed into public agendas, participation becomes a liberating social practice. It founds new social, political, and economic coordinates of meanings and actions that enable the underprivileged to reflect and act upon poor living as well as on themselves, opening the way to a “new manner of being in society.”

Ethiopia is not a historical *tabula rasa*. Therefore, public reasoning and contestation take place in the participants’ sociocultural space. Given that the capabilities approach targets the deprivations that prevent Ethiopians from exercising their agency freedoms, public reasoning and contestation have to be rooted in the participants’ “intersubjective and common meanings” (Taylor 1988:15–57). This excludes the process of abstract deliberation associated with liberal democracy and whose principle of operation is best caught in the procedural idea of “a veil of ignorance,” which strips participants of their characteristics (Rawls 1971:136–142). Capability-driven participation is incompatible with noncontextual deliberation, for the goal of such participation is to overcome the unfreedoms that articulate the specific context within which the participants live.

One may object that peasants, pastoralists, and the urban poor—the majority of Ethiopians—subscribe to traditional practices and do not possess the kind of knowledge necessary to find effective solutions to political, economic, and social problems. Such a situation, one could further object, will limit the scope and depth of participation, and even generate stands incompatible with the demands of a democracy that articulates freedom, development, and social justice (Edwards 1989).

To deal with such objections satisfactorily, it is important to remember that, in light of the aspirations of Ethiopians, democracy is a universal value. The universality of democracy is also what informs the capabilities

approach (Sen 1999); however, this does not mean that there is only one kind of democracy: American democracy expresses American culture and history; Indian democracy expresses Indian culture and history; Japanese democracy expresses Japanese culture and history; and so forth. Each is a concrete manifestation of the universal ideal of democracy, but none is an imitation of the other, for each is rooted in its own history. Like language, a universal human capability, though it exists only as languages, each tongue expressing the social practices and historical experiences of a particular society, democracy, though universal, can exist only as a particular democracy that cashes into the historical experiences, tasks, and aspirations of a given people. Consequently, a democracy rooted in a deep and wide participation of Ethiopians will express the cultures, aspirations, and history of Ethiopians in the same way that American, Indian, and Japanese democracies express their own.

An objection that pits tradition against modernity commits an epistemic violence that renders Ethiopian traditions mute and inert. It occludes the fact that no living tradition is homogeneous and immutable, and that contradictory interpretations of the same tradition, reflecting divergent interests, inform conflicts. The Dekike Estifanos (Haile 2004), who emerged in the fifteenth century from within one of the most traditional institutions of Ethiopia, the church, were one of the most virulent critiques of the imperial order and the church. Social conflicts are part of Ethiopia's traditions (Crummey 1986; Gebru 1991). Such conflicts question the existing social arrangements and harbor potentially new "social imaginary" (Taylor 2004:23–30), inspired by the unfulfilled hopes for a better life. Indeed, they can transform and give new meanings to old roles and vocabularies (Haile 2004). The challenge is elucidating and harnessing the emancipatory ideas and utopian energies that inhere in these conflicts to create a democratic order that Ethiopians can self-consciously recognize as their response to their demands for freedom, prosperity, and social justice.

The above objection points to an important issue: the link between identity formation and poor living. Beliefs and social practices that are constitutive of one's personal and social identities are not easily cast off. These beliefs and social practices are often constitutive of adaptive preferences that undermine the possibilities of achieving a democracy that articulates freedom, prosperity, and social justice. The dilemma is that the struggle against adaptive preferences is largely a struggle against beliefs and social practices constitutive of personal and social identities. This means a painful process of self-questioning and struggle to recognize these beliefs and social practices as expressions of unfreedoms, to overcome them and acquire in the process new moral and political vocabularies and social practices. This process of transformation needs a nonauthoritarian moral, social, and political context if it is to be carried out in a self-conscious manner. Only comprehensive participation provides such a context. In cultivating self-assertion, mutual recognition, and mutual accountability as routine social relations, it empowers the imagination to envision an alternative future and makes possible a

collective and individual traversing of the painful contradictions between the old and the emerging emancipatory beliefs and social practices. If the removal of adaptive preferences is imposed from above, it does not free the person insofar as it does not involve a reflective endorsement of the change and will not bring about the crucial changes in identity formation necessary for recognizing and explaining unfreedoms as unfreedoms: rather, it substitutes one unfreedom for another and perpetuates poor living. The only way one enhances agency freedom and capabilities is if those who are engaged in traditional life have the effective “opportunity to participate in deciding” what parts of tradition are “valuable parts of living” giving them reason to treasure them, and what parts are not (Sen 2000a:31–32). The coordinates of meanings and values of tradition and of identity formation thus change from within through the agency of those who live the tradition, making the struggle against poor living a self-conscious activity.

The notions of debate, contestation, critique, and reasoning that such comprehensive participation assumes are not alien to Ethiopian traditions. The practice of litigation (*muget*) (Messay 1999:153, 202), the poetic reinterpretations of events among the Somalis (Samatar 1982), and the practice of governing councils (*ya’a Arbora*) among the Oromo (Legesse 2006:104) have critical dimensions that could contribute to the institutionalization of the legitimacy of debates in transforming the coordinates of meanings and values of traditions, in formulating policies, and in making decisions. The question then is how to institutionalize comprehensive participation. The answer is in the creation of a political society.

From Civil Society to Political Society

To make capabilities-driven participation the incubator of a democratic Ethiopia, self-organization and comprehensive participation are essential—which means the creation of local associations around specific issues of unfreedoms and the widening of such associations. This implies the progressive creation of networks of local, subregional, regional, and national associations of peasants, pastoralists, women, the urban poor, youth, and the underprivileged in general, around shared issues such as agriculture, husbandry, industry, nutrition, health, education, employment, housing, environmental degradation, technology, research, development, and so forth.

The nature and purpose of these associations are different from those of civil society. As discussed earlier, civil society in Ethiopia is one of the sites of the power elite, and its goal is providing palliative services, rather than overcoming poor living. The associations proposed here are neither part of the state nor of civil society: they constitute a political society, rooted in comprehensive participation. These associations are active in enhancing capabilities and resisting the depoliticization of the economy and social justice; they bypass the instruments of exclusion deployed by the state and civil society. We could consider the actions of these associations

in terms of what Max Weber (1978:54–55) calls “politically oriented action,” as opposed to “political action,” which he identifies with the action of the state. A politically oriented action “aims at exerting influence on the government” to bring about change in the “appropriation, expropriation, redistribution or allocation of the powers of government” (Weber 1978:55). Such associations form a political society, rather than a civil one, for several reasons.

First, unlike civil society, which is a site of dependency that renders invisible the political and economic mechanisms that produce powerlessness, political society, rooted in comprehensive participation, is a site of resistance to unfreedoms. It creates a shared space of visibility and responsibility wherein peasants, pastoralists, laborers, the poor, and the excluded constitute themselves, in their struggle against poor living, as self-determining subjects of “speech and action”—modes in which “human beings appear to each other” as human beings (Arendt 1958:176). A shared space of visibility and responsibility does not mean the abolition of antagonisms: on the contrary, political society brings out the political dimensions of issues and the antagonisms that characterize them, making them inseparable from public reasoning, contestation, and negotiations. Its very operation posits the “legitimacy of a debate as to what is legitimate and what is illegitimate” and secretes a new form of society, one that institutionalizes the emptiness of the place of power—a crucial development, without which regression to an authoritarian regime cannot be discounted. Whereas civil society treats the underprivileged as docile subjects, depoliticizes inequality, and reinforces adaptive preferences, political society considers the underprivileged as conflicted subjects, all equally engaged in the struggle against poor living. Since the axiom of equality is what founds comprehensive participation, the participants act in ways that generate nonauthoritarian social, political, and economic relations and ensure that others’ freedoms are not undermined in the struggle to overcome poor living.

Second, political society articulates a collective critical reflection on the unfreedoms that constrain everyday life, on the possibilities and ways of overcoming such constraints, giving birth in the process to new self-understandings and new social relations, ones that secure these new self-understandings. It therefore has emancipatory values: intrinsically, instrumentally, and constructively. Intrinsically, by making agency freedom the foundation of its operation, it expresses the self-determination and democratic self-awareness of the participants and of their manner of being in society. Instrumentally, it overcomes the “voicelessness” of the underprivileged in the definition of socioeconomic needs by providing a common world, wherein they determine their goals, rather than have these imposed on them by market forces and technocrats. Constructively, it “plays a crucial role in the formation of values and in generating social understanding” (Drèze and Sen 2002:10, 24–25). The importance of the constructive role is impossible to overestimate in the Ethiopian context; therefore, I shall unpack some of its crucial impacts.

Comprehensive participation enables the practice of “intimate” critique of poor living, enriching the semantic contents of Ethiopian cultures regarding politics, economics, and justice. The dispossessed identify, from within their own life-world, their unfreedoms, and the valued functionings they want to pursue. In the process, they develop new discursive practices, which identify and explain unfreedoms as unfreedoms, and they forge anticipatory vocabularies that open up new horizons. The tragedy of current reflection is that most of it takes place outside the life-world of Ethiopians, making reflection a homeless activity, with no dwelling in their languages and everyday life, and with no connection to their utopian dreams and imagination, opening a chasm between the life-world of the destitute majority and potentially emancipatory knowledge. Political society offers a solution to this crippling deprivation by making everyday life and its language the medium of all-encompassing participation, thus creating the conditions for enucleating from within them new discourses capable of articulating new economic, social, and political goals and actions. It enables participation-centered articulations of political, social, and economic relations, which make possible the emergence of local democratic practices as routine activities encompassing socioeconomic issues and, consequently, undermining the foundations of poor living—and the polycentricism inherent to political society offers a space of resistance to the absence of self-critical capabilities so characteristic of Ethiopian state institutions while it makes possible an increase in institutional capabilities without increasing their oppressiveness.

The new coordinates of social practices and self-understandings that emerge from political society make possible the secularization of ethnicity. Secularization is commonly understood in terms of the separation of religion and state; however, the primordial dimensions of ethnicity currently dominant in Ethiopia express a quasi-religious attachment to one’s *ethnie*. This is not because ethnicism is an archaic remnant of the past: rather, ethnicism is the effect of the erosion of historical consciousness and social hope, triggered by oppression and homeless modernization, transforming ethnicity into a metanarrative that gives sense to peoples’ senseless daily sufferings by identifying an external cause to their miseries—the other *ethnie*, or the Amhara according to the TPLF (Young 1997:154). This metanarrative retroactively posits a harmonious ethnic community, one that can be recovered by removing this assumed external cause, demanding one’s quasi-religious attachment to one’s *ethnie* as a requirement for exorcizing the assumed malevolent *ethnie*. This sanctification of ethnicity has facilitated ethnic killings in Arba Gugu (1991), Arsi (1991), Bodeno (1992), Corebarata (2002), Gambella (2004), and the Ogaden (2007), to name a few. Such ethnic attachments can neither be legislated away nor maintained without defeating the quest for a just, prosperous, and democratic Ethiopia.

Political society offers a way out of this predicament. Comprehensive participation cannot fail to expose that there are, within each *ethnie*, inequalities that breed oppression and exploitation, and that, therefore, an

ethnic perspective cannot offer effective solutions to poor living. The intimate critique of life-conditions that comprehensive participation makes possible renders intelligible the proposition that the unfreedoms one suffers could be better understood and resolved in terms of one's life-conditions as a peasant, a pastoralist, a worker, and so forth. Such awareness leads to the demystification of ethnicity as an immutable and preordained identity and to the acknowledgement of the complexity of one's identity. It unmasks ethnicism as an "adaptive preference" to oppression and exploitation and makes possible the withering away of the primordial dimensions of ethnic relations. The resulting secularization of ethnicity overcomes the stifling forces of ethnic nostalgia and parochialism and enables to imagine oneself outside the ethnic mold, thus facilitating the creation of an extra-ethnic public sphere and the affirmation of a transethnic solidarity in the construction of a democratic, prosperous, and just society.

Finally, there is the question of how democracy, prosperity, and transethnic unity could arise from within the wombs of the oppression, endemic poverty, and ethnic fragmentation that characterize Ethiopia. Those who apply concept-stretched democracy, nation, and civil society have no answer to this question except to consider these as automatic remedies of ailments, as "quinine works to remedy malaria." As Arendt observes, "no single act, and no single event, can ever once and for all deliver and save a man, or a nation" (1968:168)—that is, no direct passage is possible from the present oppressive, impoverished, and fragmented Ethiopia to a democratic, prosperous, and united Ethiopia without a mediating institution. This is the issue of what Jameson (1988b:3), calls "the vanishing mediator," which I prefer to call an "enabling mediator," referring to the role that "Protestant ethics" played, according to Weber, in the birth of capitalism from within the wombs of a non-capitalist world. Neither imported institutions nor foreign aid can play this mediating role in Ethiopia. Civil society and electoral democracy cannot play this role either, for they keep the people absent from politics through canned elections and the privatization of social justice.

Political society can play the role of the "enabling mediator." As a space of comprehensive participation that fosters a new social imaginary, one that includes the culture of self-assertion, mutual recognition, and mutual accountability, political society brings about a "mutation of [the] symbolic order" (Lefort 1988:16), a mutation that erodes the adaptive preferences that keep the powerless shackled to unfreedoms, low expectations, ethnicism, and parochialism. In creating a space for imagining, reflecting upon, and anticipating a future that is different from the present, it provides a site for experimenting with non-authoritarian social relations, which make the acceptance of rules and projects dependent on the reflective endorsement of those affected by them. It puts flesh on the idea that democracy is "a way of keeping the people present in their absence" (Rancière 2007:93). Political society has then the capacity to develop a new moral and political grammar and to become the "enabling mediator" that brings about the emergence of democracy, transethnic unity, prosperity and social justice from within the

wombs of the oppression, the ethnic fragmentation, and the endemic poverty that characterize Ethiopia. It is such a mutation of the symbolic order that concept-stretching has failed to achieve and cannot achieve. Indeed, as a new space of intelligibility and imagination, political society fulfills a revolutionary role: it goes beyond changing the existing Ethiopian realities in terms of the current aspirations of the people and brings about the crucial qualitative transformations of the aspirations themselves, expanding the democratic horizon.

In summary, then, political society is an enabling mediator, which operates a profound cultural mutation and a new “cognitive mapping” (Jameson 1988a) of social, political, and economic relations. The new self-understandings and the new social relations that secure these new self-understandings, the enriching of the semantic contents of Ethiopian cultures through the development of new moral and political vocabularies, and the participation-rooted social imaginary that makes self-assertion, mutual recognition and mutual accountability indispensable social relations provide a solid ground for subregional, regional, and countrywide democratic practices. Such a cultural mutation sows the seeds of a self-conscious, internally driven transformation of Ethiopian society and lays the foundations for an internally generated democracy that Ethiopians could recognize as a new “form of society,” which emerges from their own actions as the solution to the triple riddles—poverty, injustice, and oppression—of their history. Ethiopians could thus engage confidently in their own historically specific democratic journey in a way that reflects their cultures and aspirations as authentically as American, Indian, or Japanese democracies reflect their own cultures and aspirations. Democracy is not something one imitates, as the failures of electoral democracy demonstrate, but, as Rousseau suggests, a way of life that one identifies with.

One may ask how self-organization and comprehensive participation could be achieved in light of the decline of the cultural self-confidence of Ethiopians reflected in the blind embrace of concept-stretching in the name of “modernization,” “socialism,” “democracy,” and “development.” The starting-point for an answer to this question is the recognition of the existence of skills of self-organization in Ethiopia expressed historically in the successful resistance to colonialism in the nineteenth century and, currently, in local traditional institutions that cover issues ranging from conflict resolution to sharing work (Legesse 2006; Mequanent 1996; Rubenson 1978). These traditional skills constitute a fund of knowledge whose emancipatory elements Ethiopians could reexamine in terms of the exigencies of the present. Awra Amba, a successful egalitarian community created by “traditional people” as a response to the challenges of modernization is a living proof of the self-organizing potentials that throb in the interstices of Ethiopian cultures (Halpern 2007), but this does not exclude modern ways of organization. At this juncture, a legitimate question arises regarding the role of intellectuals in the self-organization necessary to institutionalize comprehensive participation and the political society that embodies it.

Ethiopian Intellectuals, Poor Living, and Democracy

Though the subjects of political society are those who suffer from capabilities deprivations, the participation of intellectuals is vital; however, they cannot enjoy “place-holder” functions for the underprivileged. The intellectuals’ authority is not rooted in their knowledge-claims, but in the fact that their proposals speak to the emancipatory interests of the participants and enhance their capability sets. As we can see from the failures of reforms, revolutions, and various “development” projects of the last decades, Ethiopia’s life-conditions cannot be rendered intelligible or transformed through concept stretching. Indeed, Ethiopia’s life-conditions are not waiting for imported responses; rather, the signs of possible solutions incubate in the life-conditions themselves as their surplus meanings or “surplus history” (Mennasemay 2005). The exclusion of these surplus meanings—an effect of the exclusion of Ethiopian cultures from the process of knowledge creation—has led to the current practice of authoritarian knowledge production and relations. This practice is an aspect of poor living, for it reduces Ethiopians to passive recipients of economic, social and political medication, as it were, from all-knowing experts in the name of “development.” The repeated failures of “development” and the incapacity of authoritarian knowledge production and relations to deliver the understanding necessary for a self-conscious construction of a democratic, prosperous, and just society have contributed to the disintegration of social hope and to the decline of the cultural confidence of Ethiopians to understand and transform Ethiopian realities. This erosion of cultural confidence and social hope is in part responsible for the flight of educated Ethiopians from the problems of their country, resulting in a quadruple brain drain: from rural to urban areas, from Ethiopia to the West, from critical self-reflection to concept-stretching, and from imagination to imitation, depriving Ethiopians of the intellectual and affective resources they need to overcome poor living.

If Ethiopian intellectuals are to play a constructive role in the creation of a democratic, prosperous, and just society, they need to “think in front” and not “on behalf” of the oppressed and exploited. This implies a nonauthoritarian conception of knowledge, one that institutes mutual interrogation between modern and traditional cultures so that the repressed emancipatory potentials of the past and the present, of the traditional and the modern, could be released for building a better future. This requires knowledge creation anchored in the history and life-conditions of Ethiopians so that they can draw on their imagination and utopian energies and the creative potentials of their cultures for the indispensable critical appropriation of modernity. The context-transcending knowledge that emerges from this mutual interrogation will, on the one hand, avoid the current destructive experience of “homeless knowledge that treats Ethiopians as a *tabula rasa*” (Mennasemay 2006), and, on the other, disclose an open future as an alternative to the current neoliberal conception of the future as a fixed agenda. That such a cross-fertilization between the new and the old has the capacity

to generate context-transcending knowledge and to reveal the possible futures that throb in the interstices of Ethiopian history and life-conditions is already prefigured in the works of Haddis Alemayhu, the great Ethiopian novelist (1978, 1980, 1992).⁴

The quest for such knowledge raises the issue of the responsibility of Ethiopian intellectuals. Concept-stretching makes Ethiopian history irrelevant to the self-understanding of Ethiopians and indeed makes them opaque to themselves. It confines them to dehydrated knowledge, which articulates thin conceptions of freedom, development, and social justice that are incommensurate with the kind of democracy they need to overcome poor living. Do Ethiopian intellectuals have then an obligation not to engage in concept-stretching? We cannot avoid asking this question in light of current practices and the Ethiopian intelligentsia's catastrophic stretching of Marxist concepts in the 1970s and 1980s (Messay 1999:299–345). If it is the case that concept-stretching misnames things and, consequently, adds more miseries to the ones Ethiopians already suffer, then one cannot escape the moral responsibility incurred by such a practice. This means that, though Ethiopian intellectuals might be obliged to borrow social and political concepts from others, they have the obligation to use such concepts in ways that do not do violence to the aspirations for freedom, justice, and prosperity.

Conclusion

There is no natural necessity that dictates that Ethiopian life-conditions in the third millennium will be an extension of or better than what they are now. What circumstances will prevail in the future depend on Ethiopians' will and actions. If the end is the creation of a free, prosperous, and just society, then it is this end that must be the starting-point for reflecting on how and by whom it could be achieved. Only Ethiopians can accomplish this task. If they abandon the task of reflecting critically on their history and cultures, of analyzing their needs and of imagining their future, of exploring their aspirations and utopian dreams, and limit their thinking to concept-stretching, they abandon to others the intellectual, moral, and affective resources they need to interrogate, understand, judge, and transform themselves. This means the perpetuation of current conditions into the indefinite future.

A telling omen of such a desolate future is the Millennium Development Goals which, as a project that occludes the issue of unfreedoms, evacuates the fundamental problematic of poor living. Inevitably, it reduces Ethiopian life-conditions to the technocratic issues of poverty reduction and international aid. At the dawn of the third millennium, Ethiopia's project should be The Millennium Democratic Goal, not The Millennium Development Goals. The latter condemns Ethiopians to poor living indefinitely.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Gerardo Mosquera for his comments on a draft of this paper and Samuel Dominique for giving me access to his collection of Haddis Alemayhu's works. My thanks also to the two anonymous readers of *Africa Today* for their constructive and insightful comments.

NOTES

1. The Ethiopian calendar is based on the Julian calendar. According to the Gregorian calendar, the date is 11 September 2007.
2. My idea of democracy owes a lot to Sen's conceptualization of freedoms as "capabilities" and of "development as freedom," and to Lefort's concept of democracy as a "form of society," though neither might agree with the way I have reworked their conceptualizations to respond to Ethiopia's conditions.
3. The "development" concept has been criticized also as a tenacious Eurocentric myth impervious to the failures of actually existing development (W. Sachs 1992).
4. Haddis Alemayhu depicts the dialectic between individuals and society in a way that enucleates new meanings and visions from the contradictory relations between old and new social practices. The result is context-transcending knowledge. Seble challenges tradition from within tradition itself in *Fiker esk Mekaber* (Alemayhu 1992). Interactions among ethnic, class, and traditional solidarities in the relations between Telahun and Sofia, an educated couple, Balambaras Gudeta, a Tama traditional chief, and the illiterate Tama coffeebean pickers lead to the recognition of the universal issues of social justice in *Wenjelenjaw Dagna* (Alemayhu 1978). The urban travails of the rural girl Demeketch in *YeElm Ezat* (Alemayhu 1980) lead her to discover the class nature of society and its effects on her life. In these novels, agency freedom is socially embedded, but it is, at the same time, open to the demands of new contexts and challenges, and one discovers the birth of something different that is neither new nor old, but still retains something of both and goes beyond them. These novels anticipate an alternative future arising from the cross-fertilization between new and old knowledge, novel and traditional practices, intellectuals and non-intellectuals. This cross-fertilization expands the horizons of the inherited context, not by imitating the new or discarding the old, but by traversing the painful contradictions in which the new and the old are locked.

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