

BOOK REVIEW

The State and Rural Transformation in Northern Somalia 1884-1986

Abdi Ismail Samatar

The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989

Reviewed by Michael Zmolek

This work sets out to retheorize the nature of Somalia's political economy by focusing on the role that the state plays in agrarian change and underdevelopment in Somalia. No previous work has taken on this task, and Abdi Samatar argues for the necessity of reformulating a Somali political economy that goes beyond the currently dominant methodological framework in order to bring research questions in consonance with social reality. The first task, accordingly, is "to deconstruct the ghettoization of Somali studies as a backwater area in African studies." The theoretical and methodological advances that have been made in the 1970s and 1980s in African studies, he insists, must now be critically utilized to inform the Somali condition. Samatar differs from I.M. Lewis—the leading Somalistic whose work since the 1950s has provided the foundation for Somali studies—when it comes to defining the precise meaning of specific terms, such as the state, tribalism and pastoralism. According to Samatar, these terms must be made historically specific because, for example, the pastoralism found in Somalia today is not the pastoralism of precapitalist Somalia, and distinctions such as these are not merely historical or "academic"; different usages (or nonusages) of such distinctions produce different analyses and ultimately affect people's lives in different ways.

Attempts to explain the Somali problem, both in the popular media and in academic discourse, have produced what amounts to a barrage of hollow pronouncements regarding the origin and nature of this human calamity. Accordingly, the causes

assigned to poverty are either climatic aridity, poor resource endowment, and/or a corrupt public sector.... [These scenarios] fall far short of providing a coherent and purposeful analysis of the genesis of the Somali predicament, analysis which would help in the formulation of more practical ways out of the paralysis. In no way am I arguing that inclement nature and corruption are not important in shaping the development process; rather, they constitute a secondary constraint to it. (p. 3)

Little has been written in previous work on Somalia concerning the social relations in agriculture and the extraction of surplus. Samatar sees the extraction and redeployment of surplus as the motor of development and hence a suitable point of departure. He sets out to examine the society and economy of Somalia in three stages of history: the precolonial, the colonial and post-independence periods. I shall briefly restate his historical review. The first period saw a pastoral production that was developed over the centuries to make good use of the region's meagre resources. Mobility and flexibility were therefore required, and units of production had to be small and widely dispersed. The logic of the pastoral economy was to minimize risk in order to ensure the preservation of the family. A clan system arose, each clan having from one hundred to 1,000 members, which marked the highest limit of political cooperation. Though the economy had trade with the outside, it was principally based on a barter system.

Colonialism sought control over Somalia not so much for economic returns on goods to be had there—Somalia had no copper mines or "white highlands"—but for strategic and geographic reasons. Colonial attempts at

developing pastoralism and agriculture in Somalia failed because they affected only a tiny fraction of the pastoralists and the emergent peasantry. But they did have a threefold impact, which Samatar identifies as: 1) turning a single-sector economy into a three-sector one—pastoral, peasant and town; 2) ending the era of statelessness; and 3) rupturing the traditional pastoral-ecosystem relation by establishing a commodity-based economy. In this way rural producers lost their capacity to withdraw from the economy when conditions dictated such a necessity, for they were now an integral part of a national economy, dominated by merchant capital.

In examining the postcolonial state, Samatar argues that it was "neither inherently dependent nor inherently independent from metropolitan capital." (p. 83) Incorporation into the world capitalist system "circumscribes the economic and political latitude available to the postcolonial state and society." Colonialism left a certain level of development in the nation's productive forces, which in Somalia's case was quite undeveloped. This, combined with the balance of class forces, would constitute the nature and function of the postcolonial state. The author demonstrates that the colonial regime relied heavily on outside grants to run the colonial government, and that this pattern was continued after independence.

The postcolonial regime was a balance of power between the merchants and the young bureaucrats. Neither was sufficiently powerful to dominate the political scene, and neither had a direct role to play in primary production. Both depended on surplus extracted in the sphere of exchange for their existence—the merchants relied on wholesale trade of rural produce, the bureaucrats on foreign aid to finance its development schemes. The state was therefore suspended over the population. Development schemes, usually funded by foreign aid (which typically favoured large-scale projects), failed to significantly improve the production methods of the peasants and pastoralists or to incorporate them into the planning and implementation of these schemes.

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Though initially the postcolonial regime spurred an increase in livestock production, the lack of improvements in transport meant that the northern ranges in particular were to be devastated by the increased traffic in livestock, which contributed to the suffering incurred in subsequent droughts.

The regime of 1960-69 had by its end become more reliant on foreign assistance, and its development schemes had only furthered the marginalization of the rural producers. A government reliant on outside funding for its continuation saw the fragmentation of politics into the smallest units possible, that of individuals who competed with one another for access to development money.

The 1969 elections saw the proliferation of sixty-two political parties in Somalia, the ultimate result of which was a coup. But the only thing "revolutionary" about the new regime was its success at strengthening commodity relations among rural producers, a process that began under the colonial regime.

The degeneration of politics into a scramble between individual bureaucrats for funds makes appealing to "clan" or ethnic identity among supporters an attractive means of garnering support. Samatar critiques commentators who explain the current crisis of Somali society as a triumph of old-time clan ideologies over nationalist aspirations. For Samatar, "the precolonial Somali tradition has been blown asunder by its incorporation into the world capitalist system." (p. 154)

Colonial rule attempted to establish administrative boundaries coinciding with traditional tribal areas and to make clans into vassals of the state. This "caricatured and ossified the precolonial political system" and pitted clan against clan in competition for state favours. An artificially-produced political system based on ethnicity changed the foci and character of Somali politics forever. In postcolonial Somalia, where private accumulation of wealth was fused with direct access to state funds, "ethnicity" is reinvoked by politicians in the heat of competition, unleashing "centrifugal

forces of immense destructive [potential]." (p. 159)

This work in 1989 precisely anticipated the kind of social collapse we see occurring in 1992. Samatar foresaw that the degeneration of politics along a division between the state and civil society would continue for several reasons: a) ethnic cleavages are deepened by the use of military force against selected populations; b) certain ethnic groups are overrepresented in the armed forces and other sectors of the public realm; c) the breakdown of the public security system prolongs the crisis; and d) continued "development" funding perpetuates and deepens the cleavage between the state and rural producers, who find that they are pawns in the intraclass rivalries of state bureaucrats. Finally, Somalia's nationalist ideology "the main supraclan cohesive fiber in this society," is in jeopardy due to the unprecedented use of coercion and repression by the previous authoritarian regime, which thereby undermined the basis of state legitimacy.

The repression by the militarized 'tribalist' regime deepens ethnic cleavages because communities and individuals seek refuge in the ruins of precapitalist social structures, which ironically reinforces social fissures. This prolongs the dying of the deformed old and delays the birth of the new. (pp. 161-62)

For Samatar, the crisis in Somalia is one of social reproduction. This crisis is circumscribed by the economic relations between the state, the mercantile class and the rural producers. Readers who wish to deepen their understanding of the current crisis in Somalia should study this work and the issues with which it is engaged.

As a student of Abdi Samatar at the University of Iowa, I first came to understand the relevance and importance of theory in academic discourse. "Theory is the eyes of your mind," he instructed us. Professor Samatar is a keen theorist with a profound grasp of Somalia's social realities. ■

Summer Course on Refugee Issues

York University July 4-16, 1993

The Centre for Refugee Studies will inaugurate a Summer Course in July 1993 to provide fresh insights to people from several social sectors who are already familiar with some aspect of refugee issues. Enrolment will be limited to about fifty participants.

The Course offers an overview of a range of refugee issues, an in-depth examination of current issues lead by leading figures, and an opportunity to explore current developments:

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- History of Nation States and Refugees
- Role of the UNHCR and International Organizations
- Law and Refugee Status

Week 2: Module 2/ Module 3

— Special Units

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- Settlement, Assistance and Solutions

Participants are encouraged to take the full two-week program which will be taught at the graduate level.

Completed applications must reach the Centre before April 30, 1993. Payment of the course fee of \$800 must be made before June 15, 1993. Accommodation and meals are additional. The Centre hopes to provide some grants of up to \$500 towards course fees for eligible groups or individuals.

For further information, please contact:

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Coordinator, Centre for Refugee
Studies, York University, Suite 322,
York Lanes, 4700 Keele Street,
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Tel: (416) 736-5663

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REFUGE@YORKVM1

RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP AND AWARDS

Centre for Refugee Studies YORK UNIVERSITY

A. KATHLEEN PTOLEMY RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP

An annual Can. \$15,000 Kathleen Ptolemy Research Fellowship has been set up to permit a visiting scholar from a developing country to undertake research on refugees. Scholars interested in the study of refugee women who are in need of protection, and demonstrate commitment to refugee rights advocacy or service to the disfranchised will be given priority.

B. ANNUAL RESEARCH AWARDS

The goal of these research awards is to provide funding to a number of graduate students while they undertake research projects under the auspices of the Centre for Refugee Studies. Eligible students are/will be registered full time in a graduate program at York University and whose intended research area is refugee and migration studies. International students are eligible to apply.

VALUE OF AWARDS

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The Naomi Harder Award may not be held in conjunction with an external scholarship or any other teaching or research assistantship.

ii. General Refugee Awards - 5 awards of Can. \$9,000

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Candidates should submit a curriculum vitae (resumé), academic records, two letters of reference and a sample of research or publications to the Centre for Refugee Studies, together with a statement of intent by March 15, 1993.

VISITING SCHOLARS

Visiting scholars may use the facilities at the Centre for Refugee Studies for short-term or long-term projects. Short-term projects are those that can be completed within a few weeks or months. We will provide visiting scholars with office space and a computer. Long-term research projects are for the duration of the academic year, which extends from September to April and are also eligible for funding support.

Please submit your applications to:

Helen Gross, Student/Faculty Liaison
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Tel: (416) 736-5663 • Fax: (416) 736-5837
E-mail via BITNET, address: REFUGE@YORKVM1

CRS ANNUAL DINNER AND MEETING

FEBRUARY 4, 1993

Yes, it's that time of year again! The Centre for Refugee Studies (CRS) cordially invites you and your friends to join us at our Annual Chinese Dinner and Meeting. The dinner is being held on February 4, 1993 at the Jade Garden Restaurant, 222 Spadina Avenue, Toronto.

VINCENT KELLY AWARD

We are pleased to announce that we have invited the Honourable Kim Campbell, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, to present the Vincent Kelly Award.

This year's award will be presented to **Barbara Jackman** and **Pierre Duquette**, two lawyers who have performed outstanding work on behalf of refugees. The dinner will focus on the legal profession and its contribution in the area of refugee studies.

CRS ENDOWMENT FUND

Our Annual dinner is an opportunity for the Centre to bring together those interested and involved in refugee studies. This year the dinner will assist in funding two graduate legal students with their research through the CRS Endowment Fund.

We look forward to you joining us or your financial support through a donation, which will then enable people from the refugee community to attend our dinner on your behalf.

Please copy the registration form and send it to us at your earliest convenience. The CRS greatly appreciates your interest in and support of our endeavours.

Join Us!

**CENTRE FOR REFUGEE STUDIES
ANNUAL DINNER AND MEETING**

Jade Garden Restaurant

222 Spadina Avenue, Toronto

February 4, 1993

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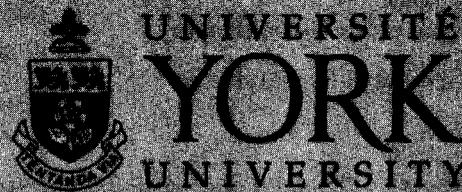
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Applicants are expected to have academic appointments at York University and to have a distinguished record of scholarship and strong research interests in refugee studies or related issues. They must possess the capacity to administer and develop the research programs of this interdisciplinary unit.

The Director is expected to administer the day-to-day activities of the Centre, to fulfil the CIDA Centre of Excellence mandate, to develop additional funding sources, and to maintain an active research program. The successful applicant will receive an appropriate course load reduction through the Centre of Excellence agreement and an administrative stipend.

Applications and nominations (including curriculum vitae and suggested references) should be sent by **January 15, 1993**, to:

Barbara Tryfos
Secretary of the Search Committee
Office of the Associate Vice-President (Research)
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