

# BOOK REVIEW

**Daniel Mains. *Under Construction: Technologies of Development in Urban Ethiopia*.** Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. xi + 215 pp. Notes. References. Index. \$25.95. Paper. ISBN: 97814780-06411.

*Under Construction: Technologies of Development in Urban Ethiopia* is the result of several years of ethnographic field research by author Daniel Mains. It is a well written and methodical exposition that describes the ambivalence and hope invested in constructing an imagined Ethiopian renaissance. On the one hand, academic accounts (and journalistic exposes) depict Ethiopia as an example of one of the new “African Lions.” The lived experience of many Ethiopians, however, paints a different picture; they complain that they struggle to access electricity, water, and other basic services, and lack the opportunity for due participation in the decision-making that drives development processes.

The book is organized into five chapters, each of which examines a particular form of urban infrastructure, to advance arguments about the everyday encounters between citizens, the state, and the materials used in construction. The specific topics covered are: (1) the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (29–58); (2) asphalt road construction (58–91); (3) processes of urban development in Jimma (92–120); (4) Bajaj transportation (121–50); and (5) the construction of cobblestone roads (151–80).

*Under Construction* addresses the fact that Ethiopia had one of the fastest-growing economies in the world between 2007 and 2017, and much of that growth resulted from high levels of state investment in infrastructure. Discussing Ethiopia and a handful of other African countries, the *Economist* in its December 3, 2011, edition published a cover story titled “Africa Rising,” which offered the hope that after decades of slow economic growth, African countries finally had a real chance at rapid economic progress. However, as this book acknowledges, the “Africa rising” narrative celebrated the withdrawal of the state as creating an opportunity for economic growth that was not stifled by an inefficient and often predatory bureaucracy. There is no better example of the cracks in the “Africa rising” narrative than Ethiopia, which had been one of the fastest risers.

This book touches on the quest, so important in development studies, to establish a theoretical foundation with regard to the actors which drive development, whether the state, the market, or civil society. The author of the book argues that Ethiopia's state-led development approach has worked at a time when the state in general had come to be seen as a central problem by academics and international financial institutions.

The Ethiopian government, rather than standing aside to make way for private enterprise and market growth, has actively intervened in the economy and in driving development. For the ruling regime, investing billions of dollars in hydropower dam projects, asphalt roads, and urban expansion has been a key strategy for achieving a hegemonic developmental state. Ethiopia today is considered a developmentalist state, the book argues, as other scholars such as Rene Lefort and Sarah Vaughn agree. Other seasoned scholars, such as Hilary Matfess and Thandika Mkandawire, believe that Ethiopia shares few of the classical "developmental state" features observed in the Asian economies or discussed in the African development narrative. The Ethiopian model is neither democratic nor developmental. At best, Ethiopia, along with Rwanda, can be escribed as a "developmental neopatrimonial state."

*Under Construction* makes the case for using construction as both a theory and a methodological approach for exploring the relation between state-led development and destruction that is emerging globally. As a methodology, the process of construction is a site for ethnographic research regarding the way in which states, citizens, and infrastructures encounter each other and interact. The methodological relevance is fittingly clear. However, the choice of this concept as an analytical framework is less obvious. The author argues that construction, which is very different from concepts such as abjection or rising that have recently been used in relation to development in Africa, offers an analytical framework for understanding the continual grappling and contestations between citizens and the state over access to services and imagined futures.

This is especially significant in view of the widespread protests against the Ethiopian state that culminated in the overthrow of the regime in 2018. The protest was triggered by the non-participatory and discriminatory nature of development processes in the country (in particular, the uncontrolled expansion which took place in the city of Addis Ababa and the expropriation of land from Oromo farmers.) From this angle, construction doesn't seem to be a robust enough concept to contribute to a discussion of the realities on the ground, particularly the post-2018 period. During this time there have been numerous setbacks: a nationwide severe cement shortage (and increase in cement prices by up to 250 percent) and the consequent construction stoppages; civil war and catastrophic humanitarian crisis; U.S. sanctions against the country; and economic mismanagement and political deadlocks. All of these challenges could be seen as signals that the country is imminently "under deconstruction" rather than "under construction." Seen from this

perspective, the conceptual robustness of construction and its function as the title of this magnificent book may be questioned.

Overall, *Under Construction* makes an important contribution not only to the field of the anthropology of development but also to urban development, at a time when many studies in Ethiopia have been placing more emphasis on rural communities. Daniel Mains, while basing his empirical evidence on the selected urban projects which appear to be perpetually under construction, shows that the process of construction has changed the relationship between citizens and the state, and not always for the better.

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