

»The possibilities are endless«: progress and the taming of contingency, by Katrin Bromber, Paolo Gaibazzi, Franziska Roy, Abdoulaye Sounaye, Julian Tadesse, Programmatic Texts No. 9, 2015

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Bromber, Gaibazzi, Roy, Sounaye, and Tadesse's programmatic text »*The possibilities are endless*«: *progress and the taming of contingency* is a thought-proving paper that identifies and elaborates on an analytical tool which is highly valuable to – among others – scholars grappling with processes of collective action and social change. In terms of my own research, there are a number of ways in which the programmatic text relates to core concerns and provides precious food for thought.

On a most basic level, the subject matter of my research, the Ethiopian labour movement, is a phenomenon produced – root and branch – by conditions bristling with contingency. In general workers organise in order to tame contingent conditions which they can influence only by acting collectively. In the Ethiopian case, unions grew out of workplace *iddirs* in the 1950s and 1960s, formed by new ranks of workers within novel social and economic engagements, in order to reduce the vulnerability and shape the outcome of these engagements.

»The anticipation and desire of a certain future and the possibility of its actualisation« (Programmatic Text p. 1) is another aspect that explains the emergence and enticement of organised labour. While workers struggle to tame or to take advantage of contingencies, they do so anticipating an increasing leverage and likelihood of certain outcomes – be it in the defence or the improvement of the position of workers, in the face of adversity.

Pertaining to the relation between »the anticipation and desire of a certain future and the possibility of its actualisation«, it may be useful to call attention to a point relating to progress and

determination. There is an important distinction between narratives of progress that are intended to propagate the viability of a certain project for more or less instrumental reasons, and earnest analytical assessments. In reality, sincere assumptions of inevitability of desired change/progress is probably extremely rare among collective actors dedicated to realising a project of change/progress. After all, there are few reasons to engage in collective action if the desired ends are expected to be met regardless. As a corollary, collective actors embarking on even the most contingent course of action need to be motivated by anticipation grounded on an assurance that on some level, at least, »reality [is] intrinsically malleable to human agency« (Programmatic Text p. 4). In its absence there would be complete randomness, a condition which is unlikely to generate any form of collective coping strategy.

An example taken from the history of the Ethiopian labour movement illustrates the concern with contingency in an environment structured, nevertheless, by purposeful human agency. The resolutions of the general congress of the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions from September 1975 – the last such congress to be held by the organisation before its forced abolishment and repression – warned that the suppression of democratic rights risks leading to a situation where »the intensifying class struggle step-by-step is replaced by national struggle«. The concern with contingency is explicit in the resolution – with a high level of predictive accuracy, as it turned out – but was also combined with a rhetoric reflecting a certain assuredness that the movement would prevail. It could be

argued that this duality represents the aim of the text: to rally momentum for a general strike *and* to avert the danger of repression, but also that an anticipated path (progress through class struggle) was viewed as subject to contingencies (repression) threatening to deflect this into something quite different (national struggle).

Bromber, Gaibazzi, Roy, Sounaye, and Tadesse's programmatic text highlights how contingency frequently constitutes or can be cast as opportunity, and that »moments of heightened awareness of contingency... emerge from actual or felt transitions within or concerning a given society... that expected or witnessed changes give rise to a more acute feeling of contingency and the will to master the future in some way«. In the case of the Ethiopian labour movement, it is probably not a coincidence that the two last major strike waves have coincided with periods of rapid change where the state's repressive capacity has waned. Rank-and-file workers and basic unions have taken advantage of uncertainties and lapses in the control regime imposed by the state to reshape their conditions and position. Indeed, the most recent contemporary political crisis in Ethiopia has already been seized upon by workers in a string of companies downing tools and, in one case at least, expelling their managers. So strong have the energies released been that the otherwise timid central confederation was recently emboldened to invoke the spectre of a general strike.

Pressing in the opposite direction, employers (and the state is the major employer of wage la-

bour) too have attempted to take advantage of periods wherein the labour movement has been weak in order to roll back prior concessions, and to repress wages. The broad and distinct waves – that have seen real wages in Ethiopia rise by some sixty percent between the 1960s and the mid-1970s only to have a full half of the real value of mid-1970s-wages disappear up to the present¹ – are outcomes of this contestation.

Consistently, moreover, the state has imposed a control/co-option regime aimed at preventing the labour movement from regaining assertive momentum and developing militant practices. According to one observer, this reflects »false perceptions and an exaggerated sense of worth« on behalf of organised labour and have given »the trade union movement a significance and power far beyond its actual potential«². But in light of the repeated recurrence of labour militancy and assertiveness over the past sixty years or so, it is probably more accurate to describe this strategy of the state – in terms inspired by Bromber, Gaibazzi, Roy, Sounaye, and Tadesse's text – as a highly rational attempt to tame contingency, lest another explosion in labour militancy should occur.

1 These figures are derived from my forthcoming dissertation »Dynamics of Assertive Labour Movementism in Ethiopia: Organised Labour, Unrest and Wages in a Socio-Historical Perspective«.

2 Dessalegn Rahmato (2002) »Civil Society Organizations in Ethiopia«, in Bahru Zewde and S. Pausewang (eds.), *Ethiopia: The Challenge of Democracy from Below*, pp. 103-119. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute.