

»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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Youth, Infrastructure, and the Taming of Contingency in Urban Ethiopia

In their exploration of contingency and progress Bromber, Gaibazzi, Roy, Sounaye, and Tadesse write, »Youth functions as a projection surface for visions of the future, as well as the most natural object and subject when it comes to implementing change thanks to it acting as a somatic bridge between present and future« (p.3). If youth is a »somatic« bridge to the future, infrastructure is the concrete bridge. The Amharic term for infrastructure, *meseret limat*, literally translates as »the foundation for development«. Narratives of progress are built on youth and infrastructure, but such movement through time is almost never simple, and involves the negotiation of numerous contingencies. My research concerning Ethiopian youth demonstrates that for a variety of reasons, youth are often stuck, unable to progress through time and take on the normative responsibilities of adults¹. Youth represent possible futures, but in much of Africa these futures are not attained. The same is true of infrastructure. In Ethiopia, the more than \$500 million Gibe II hydropower project, intended to generate 420 MW of power, experienced a tunnel collapse shortly after its inauguration. This was a major setback to a power project intended to generate progress and support Ethiopia's transformation into a middle-income country.

One of the key insights that Katrin Bromber and her colleagues develop is that the recognition of contingency and the possibility that life could be different varies across time and space. They encourage scholars to give attention to the tension between causal narratives and contingency. Progress depends on a sense of contingency, the belief that life in the future could be different than the present. However, at times narratives of progress have become so intense that modernization was perceived as inevitable, and the possibility of failure was not acknowledged. More recently, in much of Africa a different set of expectations have taken hold, perhaps best described in James Ferguson's analysis of abjection and economic decline². In the context of structural adjustment a narrative of inevitable decline took hold, in which contingency, and the possibility of a more desirable future were often ignored.

In the Ethiopian case a peculiar intersection exists between youth, infrastructure and contingency. Youth and infrastructure are brought together in order to open certain possible futures, while closing off others that are associated with failure. For example, it seems that the recent introduction of an education policy that requires at least 70 percent of university students to study fields related to science, technology, engineering and medicine is intended to create a generation of young people who can build the infrastructure needed for economic development. The youth/in-

¹ Mains, Daniel. 2012. *Hope is Cut: Youth, Unemployment and the Future in Urban Ethiopia*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

² Ferguson, James. 1999. *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

infrastructure relationship is perhaps most visible in the cobblestone roads project, initiated by the German Development Cooperation Office and now supported by the World Bank. The project has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in the construction of more than six hundred kilometers of urban roads, sidewalks, and drainage ditches. In the process over 100,000 temporary jobs have been created, primarily for young people.

In the case of cobblestone, a particular technology is employed largely for its perceived ability to tame contingency. What can a cobblestone do about contingency? According to the German Development Cooperation Office, quite a lot. Figure 1, in a document titled, »Making Good Governance Tangible,« explains, »how a simple piece of stone makes a difference.« It displays lines radiating out from a cobblestone connecting with various impacts: environment, health, social, employment, economic, and good governance. It is the particular material and technical qualities of cobblestone that create these impacts³.

The most interesting claim is that cobblestone supports decentralization and good governance. Cobblestone road construction projects are small. Each project is no more than a few kilometers in length. This means that inexperienced administrators can refine their management skills with these sorts of projects. Decentralization occurs as local governments develop the capacity to manage their own projects rather than rely on the federal government. The tangible, visible nature of cobblestone is also important. Cobblestone roads are constructed in urban residential neighborhoods where citizens can directly observe every step in the construction process. The inefficiencies and instances of corruption that are often associated with state managed projects can be identified and critiqued by citizens, thus creating a degree of accountability that does not exist in larger projects that are not so easily observed from start to finish. In other words, in theory, the particular nature of the cobblestone technology addresses variables like corruption and mismanagement that could derail the progressive movement associated with infrastructural development.

The reciprocal relationship between youth and cobblestone is also intended to tame contingency and support visions of progress in the lives of youth and Ethiopian cities. In my book, *Hope is Cut: Youth, Unemployment, and the Future in Urban Ethiopia*, I argue that unemployment is a key barrier that prevents urban young men from actualizing local notions of progress in which they are able to reposition themselves in relations of exchange, and gradually accumulate dependents. The labor-

intensive nature of cobblestone road construction creates the jobs that young men need. Young people also organize themselves into microenterprise companies that compete for cobblestone contracts, learning valuable business management skills in the process. My research demonstrates that many young men are able to earn incomes that allow them to take on normative adult masculine responsibilities. Young men build rooms within their parents' compounds, enroll in evening educational programs, and create small business opportunities for their families. On the other hand, taming contingency and progressing towards adulthood is certainly not simple. City administrators responsible for the cobblestone project claimed that microenterprise companies should eventually »graduate« to take on larger construction projects, but in fact this was extremely rare. Young men who were involved in cobblestone were no longer stuck in the category of youth, but neither were they making neat progress toward something resembling a normative model of adulthood. Instead they hustled for construction contracts and appeared to exist in what I think of as a period of messy maturation. They experienced changes that often cohered with local notions of progress, but this change was certainly not unidirectional, as young cobblestone workers continued to depend on parents and other family members when work was not available.

The use of young manual labor is also a means of addressing contingency associated with infrastructural development. As the Gibe II hydro-power project demonstrates, infrastructure often fails, and that failure undercuts development and the attainment of imagined futures. Cobblestone mitigates the costs of failure. Repairing a damaged road requires youth labor and rocks, neither of which is in scarce supply. In this sense, cobblestone may be contrasted with Ethiopia's billion dollar dam projects, where the cost of failure is enormous. If the five billion dollar Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project is a case of high risk/high reward, cobblestone roads tame the possibility of failure by relying on a slower, more gradual form of progress that builds on the bodies and skills of Ethiopia's massive youth population.

The analysis developed in »The Possibilities are Endless,« is so valuable because it suggests a new direction for research. Rather than simply describing a seemingly endless number of possible futures that may, or may not, be realized, Bromber and her colleagues encourage scholars to think critically about how different actors conceptualize contingency. The tension between contingency and narratives that close off other possibilities has a profound influence on policy and day-to-day practice. In the Ethiopian case, a peculiar relationship between youth and infrastructure is utilized with the hope of taming contingency and progressing towards a desirable future.

3 German Development Cooperation Office. 2012. *Making Good Governance Tangible: The Cobblestone Sector of Ethiopia*. Bonn, Eschborn: GIZ