

# Messay Kebede and false 'dialectics'<sup>1</sup>

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The analysis contained in Messay Kebede's recent Ethiomedia article (<http://www.ethiomedia.com/1000bits/the-thinking-and-objective-of-polarizing-politics.html>) is severely flawed in that it is based on a complete misrepresentation of Marxism and dialectical thinking. The 'marxism' caricatured in this article consists of mechanical thinking that reduces Marxism from a creative and living revolutionary science to a dead set of dogmas.

'For Marxism' Messay states 'everything is contradictory', taking night and day as an example: 'to constitute these two moments as opposites, I must obviously ignore intermediary states and retain only extremes', he concludes. But to come to this conclusion, Messay must have completely blanked on what dialectical thinking is. Dialectical thinking refers to the *interpenetration and unity of opposites*, rather than the vulgarisation that Messay is pushing. Mao<sup>2</sup> put it succinctly when he stated that 'first, the existence of each of the two aspects of a contradiction in the process of the development of a thing presupposes the existence of the other aspect, and both aspects coexist in a single entity; second, in given conditions, each of the two contradictory aspects transforms itself into its opposite'. What is interesting about night and day, from a dialectical perspective, is not that they are opposites. That would be an utterly banal statement. What is interesting, and what needs to be considered for us to be able to understand either night or day is precisely that they are part of the very same process, and that night *becomes* day. They interpenetrate each other and form a dialectical unity. To say this is to state something in dialectical terms. It is quite the opposite of Messay's false representation of dialectics, which speaks of 'rigid oppositions' that are 'mutually exclusive'.

Messay's mischaracterisation of dialectics, then, is conformant to a form of mechanical thinking which carries material implications. While Messay is completely right to discard any notion of 'dialectics' that operates in the quite non-dialectical sense he describes, it is necessary to note that this was the mechanical thinking that was proselytised by the former regime, while it rubbed out, with great violence, the proposition of real dialectical analysis of the Ethiopian social formation. It was necessary that no open dialectical investigation was permitted, as that would have immediately removed the veil behind which the bureaucratic rulers were establishing new exploitative relations. Instead, it was replaced with a number of dogmas on, for example, how socialism could be equated with and essentially reduced to state ownership. Today too, there is great temptation in resorting to essentialist and mechanical thinking for those – for one reason or the other – wishes to 'return' to the comforting illusion of eternal stability, tranquillity and harmony. But it comes at the cost of mystification of social reality. Dialectical thinking forces us to come to terms

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<sup>2</sup> Hence, we must conclude that the writers of the 'Chinese pamphlets' Messay ridicules had an understanding of dialectics that was a whole lot more sophisticated and quite different than the one caricatured by Messay.

with this reality by removing the veil under which exploitative relations are reproduced, but this does not mean that it introduces a system of rigid and mutually exclusive oppositions. Quite the opposite is in fact true.

It is not an exercise in hair-splitting to draw this line of demarcation between Messay's vulgar mechanical characterisation and real dialectical thinking. Rather, it is absolutely necessary to do so to prevent the subversion of the meaning of Marxism and dialectics in popular understanding. If the aim is to critique Marxism, we can at least demand that those critiquing it has the decency not to misrepresent it. Only then can we have a proper discussion of its merits and demerits.