day, education remains intimately related to social class’ (p. 123). Next in Chapter 6, Southall shows the middle class at work. This is another very insightful contribution of the book. As the author says, this topic has other very insightful contribution of the day, education remains intimately related to social class if they are to entertain any hope of moving up the occupational ladder. The author disaggregates the work experiences of his subject into analytical categories of state managers, corporate managers, professionals, semi-professionals, and white-collar workers. What follows is a careful examination of each category’s functional and behavioural dynamics in the workplace as well as their political influence and capacities for representation. While these categories have undoubtedly opened up avenues for enrichment and wealth accumulation and represent different and diverse fractions in the economy, Southall argues that ‘in the post-apartheid era, the state and capital are locked in a contradictory relationship; both are highly dependent upon each other, yet the relationship is also highly antagonistic’ (p. 160). In Southall’s view, the differences and diversities in work experiences, the different layers of the black middle class are united in a common vision and that is ‘…to do better for themselves, and to ensure themselves and their families a better standard of living and style of life’ (p. 162). How this precarious existence has seen downturn and an economy that is mired in crisis and crass materialism are often associated with corruption, rent-seeking, and having the right political connections. The perversely incentives that come with such behaviour has now become known as ‘state capture’, where members of the black African middle class face increasing public, judicial, and parliamentary scrutiny and criticism. In addition, they are also saddled with onerous forms of consumer debt as the years of relative prosperity that characterised the Mandela-Mbeki years have been displaced by an economic downturn and an economy that is mired in a recession. Southall also delves into how this precarious existence has seen members of the black middle class increasingly seeking refuge, solace, and inspiration in religion, especially in redemptive Pentecostal and charismatic Christian churches which have a ‘…particular appeal to the black middle class’ (p. 191).

This brings us to the final thematic Chapter 8, which takes up the problematic challenge of understanding the political orientation of the black middle class, in particular their relationship to democracy and development. Southall attempts to accomplish this task through a thoughtful examination of three propositions, which are: firstly, that the black middle class was a force for democracy leading up to the transition in 1994 which signalled the end of apartheid; secondly, that the black middle class is both the offspring of ANC patronage as well as the main proponent and advocate of its legitimacy and credentials to govern the country; and thirdly, that the heterogeneous nature of the black middle class is vital to the consolidation of South Africa’s nascent democracy.

In terms of the logics of these propositions, Southall considers whether the black middle class could be considered a progressive or reactionary force in either advancing democracy or promoting authoritarianism since ‘the reality is likely to be far more ambiguous, if not downright messy’, hence, the progressive ethos of the black middle class is not simply a given of social existence and ought to be questioned (p. 219).

The book concludes with a reflective afterword that locates the black middle class in South Africa against the broader discourse in Africa and the Global South, where there have been ascendant middle classes and who are often seen as ‘drivers of development’ (p. 223). The afterword is also an invitation to proactive, comparative, and critical research on the characteristics of the continent’s middle class, highlighting what has been done in understanding its colonial and post-colonial trajectories, but also revisiting classical debates about how the middle class relates to issues of development or otherwise.

According to Southall, this raises two critical challenges: one is filling major historical gaps in studying the ‘middle class’ in Africa compared to the established focus on elites, the bourgeoisie, working classes, migrants, and peasants; the second is the requirement of defining precision which draws on different and contrasting disciplinary traditions and theoretical approaches. Finally, there is Southall’s cautionary injunction that any research agenda must guard against treating South Africa as a sui generis and exceptional while obviously being sensitive to the fact that the country’s transitional dynamics after 1994 were profoundly shaped by its black middle class.

Ultimately, Southall has written a very important book which represents a refreshing appraisal of a complex subject. His interpretations are subtle, supported by thoughtful arguments and excellent scholarship. It is thus a fitting and lasting tribute to Leo Kuper.

Christopher Clapham is a doyen of scholarship on twentieth and twenty-first century Ethiopian politics. He has published extensively not only on Ethiopia, but also on the Horn of Africa and the African continent at large. His two previous monographs on Ethiopia, Haile Selassie’s Government (Prager 1969), and Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia (Teachout 1984) have been standard references on the topics addressed in the two books. His various articles and conference papers on Ethiopia have been additional sources of information and inspiration for students of modern Ethiopian politics.


The book contains six chapters. Chapter 1 deals with the ‘power of landscape’, a discussion of the Horn’s geography and its impact on societies and histories. Chapter 2 addresses histories of state creation and collapse. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 deal with Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somali states, respectively. Chapter 6 summarizes the entire work and reflects on the whole region, including its global importance.

The author states that the book addresses the ‘dynamics of state formation and decay’ (p. 2) in the Horn of Africa, its ‘primary concern being ‘with developments since 1991’ (p. 5). He writes: ‘It is the central argument of the book that the dynamics of the Horn are essentially home grown’ (p. 2). The external powers that intervened in the Horn were ‘absorbed into the existing structures of the region’.

The author states that the Horn is distinct from the rest of Africa in three fundamental ways. First, despite secessionist movements that emerged in many parts of Africa, it was only in the Horn that they succeeded. In 1991, Eritrea and Somaliland de facto seceded from Ethiopia and were recognized by Ethiopia’s allies, Italy and ‘impeccable’ geography. This approach is historically inaccurate, as no invader who attempted to take over Ethiopia ever found her geography an insurmountable barrier.

The Horn Breaks African State Norms Teshale Tibebe

The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay
by Christopher Clapham


The third uniqueness of the Horn lies in its ‘non-colonial’ status. Although Eritrea and the Somali entities were European colonies, Clapham categorizes them under the term of ‘non-colonal’. What does Clapham mean when he calls the Horn ‘non-colonial’? He attributes non-coloniality in the Horn to the presence in the region of the ‘only indigenous sub-Saharan African state, the Ethiopian empire’ (p. 3). As such, given the weight and centrality of Ethiopia in the Horn, and given that it was never colonized, the other states of the Horn that were colonized were ‘subordinated to non-colonial dynamics to a degree that did not occur elsewhere’ (p. 3).

In other words, what made the Horn’s dynamics ‘non-colonial’ is the hegemony of a non-colonial state, Ethiopia, over those who were colonized by Europeans - Eritrea and the Somali states. This is a major theoretical innovation that was not advanced before in studies of the Horn.

The thesis has a major flaw, however. Although Ethiopia was not colonized, the other states and peoples in the Horn region, and inside some parts of Ethiopia itself, saw it as a colonial power that ruled over them as colonial subjects. Accordingly, from their perspective, what made the Horn unique was not its being ‘non-colonial’, but rather being ‘subordinate to a different kind of colonial domination. What made it different is that the perceived colonial power was not European, but African. All nationalist movements in the Horn of Africa, from Eritrea to Somalia, including the
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The Italian colony of Eritrea and the British colony of Somaliland Protectorate became the new states of the Horn, born out of the fracture of Ethiopia and Somalia. Here, the Horn proves to be in line with, not different from, the rest of Africa.

Clapham sees Ethiopia as the key to the Horn of Africa, as the dominant powerhouse of the region, the ‘prison through which the Horn’s peoples passed’ (p. 188). He discusses Ethiopia in great detail, delving deep into its history, state structure, power relations, and regional hegemony. The other regions of the Horn, Eritrea and the Somali entities, are discussed to a large degree in relation to Ethiopia. The chapter on Eritrea is mostly focused on Ethiopia’s failure to live up to its promised potential. He called Ethiopia ‘one of the greatest tragedies in the modern history of the Horn of Africa’, even as he appreciates the ‘quite extraordinary experience through which Eritrea came to independence’ (p. 112). In the Horn, he sees Ethiopia as ‘ever the spoiler in regional politics’ (p. 69). He goes on to explain how internal colonization, where the internal colonizers, were privileged compared with the external colonialism, which he meant to bring about ‘internal colonialism’, was a case of ‘internal colonialism’ (p. 33), where the internal colonizers, were privileged compared with the external colonizers. He gave the example of how the Amhara, who are antagonists, repeat the same hatred, as compared with Eritrea and Somalia, but with its fragmentation and collapse. Somalia is the failed state of the Horn, the most stable in the Horn, while fire was raging all around.

As compared with Eritrea and Somalia, Clapham has more positive things to say about Ethiopia, including its leader Meles Zenawi, whom he called ‘a man of quite extraordinary intelligence’ (pp. 69-70). He saw Meles as ‘articulate and personally charming, ideally equipped to build relations with the outside world’ (p. 70). Clapham wrote that Meles rose through the ranks of the TPLF due to ‘his intellectual ability, combined with an open-ended pragmatism in responding to events, though always within Marxist frame of reference’ (p. 70). The idea of ‘Marxist pragmatism’ may be Clapham’s contribution to political theory. Clapham also wrote about Meles’s ‘ever-appearing mind’ (p. 94). No leader in the Horn of Africa was subjected to such praise by Clapham. He called Meles, a leader, not just of Ethiopia, but of the people of Ethiopia. By contrast, Clapham has a different take on the President of Eritrea, Isayas Aferwerki: Isayas, despite (or because of) his evident skills as an insurgent leader, simply lacked the capacity to make the transition from fighter to ruler of an independent state that was demonstrated to such a striking degree by Meles in Ethiopia. He remained a street fighter, preoccupied with internal survival, and powers to set his enemies at each other’s throats. He was also besieged by the declaration of the emergency, which set off a fire storm of looting, murder, destruction, and corruption that extinguished democracy in Ethiopia and brought Ethiopia to the brink of civil war.

The declaration of emergency, the incarceration of thousands, the double-dealing with the EPLF, the splitting of the TPLF, the sacking of Meles Zenawi, the arrest of his wife, Meaza, the victory of the old guard, and the showdown in 2018 between Abiy Ahmed, the successor of Meles, and his deputy, Haile Mariam Desalegn, were the last in a long series of events that have set Ethiopia on the road to collapse. In 2022, we were witness to Meles’s death, the return of Meaza, the arrest of Haile Mariam, the sacking of the cabinet, and the triumph of the ‘new Ethiopia’.

One wonders why Clapham does not dismiss the hopes of the Horn as being foolish to assume that these tensions are, or will ever be, resolved (pp. 192-3; emphasis added).

In other words, the Horn will be the Horn, and nothing else. It is a region that comes back to what it left before, in never-ending cycles. The protagonists, who are antagonists, repeat the same pattern of conflict and confrontation because they are irrevocably divided by history and by Christianity, and Islam, statehood and ‘statelessness’, etc. That such a view is put forward by Clapham is quite troubling. It freezes history; it assumes things never change in this region. So, perhaps, per Clapham, we may need to get ready for the second coming of Ahmad Ibrahim al-Ghazi anytime in the future.

One year after the publication of Clapham’s book, the Horn began to witness a remarkable phenomenon. Dr. Abiy Ahmed was elected Prime Minister of Ethiopia in April 2018. Soon, he carried out sweeping reforms. Top on the list was a call for peace with Eritrea. He visited Eritrea, and Isayas came to Ethiopia. The man Clapham called a ‘street fighter’, one incapable of making the transition to a statesman, was warmly welcomed by hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians. Perhaps, against Clapham’s gloomy projection, the Horn could change for the better, and not for the worse.

Overall, in The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay, Clapham provides a synopsis of one of the most complex regions in the world. His insights are informed by more than half-a-century of research and writing on the region, especially Ethiopia. Written in beautiful prose and smooth flow, The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay provides overall knowledge of the region’s politics of the last three decades.