

Review of: "GERD: A Catalyst for the Nation-Building Process in Ethiopia"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

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Review in *Qeios* of: "GERD: A Catalyst for the Nation-Building Process in Ethiopia," by Estifanos Balew Liyew

Stars: 2/5.

In this article, Liyew interrogates the academic literature on state-building and national identity in Ethiopia through a case study of the country's Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project. GERD is a "nation-building consolidation engine," argues Liyew, and one that furthers the developmental mandate of The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and unites Ethiopians across geographies countering ethnic federalism.

The paper's strengths lie in its synthetic account of various theoretical approaches to nation-building (Part 3) and in its discussion of state-building and nation-building efforts in Ethiopia (Part 4). These sections usefully take a critical historical approach to understanding the EPRDF's project of nation-building in the country, drawing on the Front's aim of crafting a pan-Ethiopian identity. The author's engagements with Girardet (1986) and Burbank & Cooper (2008) support the paper's analysis here.

However, the paper suffers from two weaknesses: (1) the literature-review sections on nation-building and state formation do not engage the Ethiopian context and appear disjointed from the case-study discussion later in the paper; and (2) the argument that GERD serves to unify the Ethiopian people remains underdeveloped. I will discuss both concerns below.

First, Parts 1 and 2 of the paper engage academic literatures on nationalism and state-formation drawn primarily from political science and social theory literatures in the North Atlantic region of the world, far divorced from the Ethiopian context. One might interrogate the extent to which Weberian state-formation and Fukuyama's work on state-building apply to the case study at hand. As such, these sections of the paper appear disjointed from Parts 3–6, because these earlier

sections never touch on the Ethiopian context at all. Moreover, there are sections of the paper where strong connections to Ethiopian institutional history could be made, and these are missed opportunities. For example, in Part 3, b, the sub-section on State-Planned Policies, there is no discussion of Ethiopia's Derg, which could be framed alternatively as a Marxist-Leninist state or as a military junta that governed from 1974–1987, and arguably did so through State-Planned Policies. This sub-section is scant in general. Additionally, the author does not engage the relevant context of post-1990s Ethiopia, where free-market capital accumulation approaches to development grew popular with the EPRDF, and around the world. Scholars like Demissie (2001), Clapham (2009), (Vaughan, 2011), Mojo et al. (2017), and Feyissa (2011) examine this context and EPRDF's unique approach to governance in a late-liberal moment. The political economy of development in Ethiopia includes international-aid actors, multinational firms, foreign direct investment, and state backing, and the author does not substantively engage these actors in the paper's early sections. Projects like GERD fit within a familiar pattern of large state-backed hydro projects, that include the multiple Gibe Dams, and exist within an historical context spanning decades and countries in this region (see Shokr's [work](#) on the Aswan High Dam in Egypt as one example). The author should engage these other projects and place GERD, and the others, in political economic context.

Secondly, the author never interrogates or challenges the premise that GERD is a unifying developmental project, despite *substantial* evidence to the contrary. Other academic works, journalistic accounts, human rights reports, and primary documents have persuasively argued that the project is divisive, not developmental in nature, and will do little to ameliorate poverty or provide public goods. One alternative frame, for example, is that GERD is not a unifying developmental scheme but rather a [geopolitical power-play](#), focused on monetizing water-access rights in Egypt and Sudan. Also missing from the author's discussion of GERD are questions of land depeasantization and dispossession. I have written [elsewhere](#) on Ethiopia's Gibe III dam and its role in dispossession of indigenous communities of the Omo Valley, which has been documented by groups like Human Rights Watch, International Rivers, and the Oakland Institute. Groups like [Progressive International](#) and [EJ Atlas](#) have focused more specifically on GERD, noting the potential for vast land grabs and displacement; some 20,000 people have already been displaced for the project. Perhaps most concerning, those displaced are low-income, rural, and indigenous communities who do not fit the neat narrative of an Ethiopian model citizen.

While the EPRDF certainly advances that GERD is a unifying tool for nation-building across ethnic-federal groups, the project was never constructed with participatory or consultative community processes, and the state has [sentenced journalists to jail](#) for critical reporting on displacement and dispossession of residents in the resettlement process (as an aside, see Abbink's work (2012) which places Ethiopian dam projects in a discourse of "technocratic developmentalism," and how the projects do not permit genuine community participation). Moreover, the [ecological](#) impacts of dam are immense and urgently concerning, and involve the broader ecological region of the Nile including Sudan and Egypt, among other geographies. Lastly, the web of international financial backers for the project raise concerns about capitalization, which Timothy Mitchell (2019, 2020) defines as using specific technologies (like the large-scale dam) to allow for durable extractions of liquid revenue from Ethiopians' collective future, through standardizing, appropriating, and commodifying ecological and social resources in the present. While the author could still rightly conclude that, on balance,

the GERD project advances ethnic unity and developmental progress, they ought to at least attend to these many concerns about the project, and counter arguments about alternative motivations behind the project.

The conclusion makes an interesting contribution to scholarship on development in highlighting how different Ethiopian government regimes have taken alternative approaches, even while implementing the same projects. The idea of states requiring a tangible, physical vehicle for poverty-reduction and achieving a developmental vision is likewise very interesting. The GERD could certainly take on that expression of state policy. But the author's argument that "All Ethiopians contribute to GERD in any way they can" and that the project "Creates solidarity, unity, a common agenda, and a means to express one's own identity" is dubious at best.

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