

## Book Review: Under Construction: Technologies of Development in Urban Ethiopia by Daniel Mains

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**Daniel Mains, *Under Construction: Technologies of Development in Urban Ethiopia*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. xiii + 225 pages Paperback, \$25.95.**

*Under Construction* is a study in the anthropology of development, comprising six chapters interwoven around three intersecting central themes: 1) the state; 2) materials; and 3) citizens or labor. The citizens, by a case study of the cities of Hawassa and Jima, encounter the state as they interface with: hydroelectric dams, asphalt roads, three-wheeled motorcycle taxis, and cobblestone roads.

Daniel Mains' main argument revolves around the fact that Ethiopia, in many ways, is modernizing through the construction of infrastructure. The book argues that construction and attendant processes provide an analytic framework for understanding change: "complex intersections between the agency of humans and technologies, and their implications for different forms of inequality" (p.24). An eclectic optic of historical and vital materialism facilitates an appreciation of the nexus between human and technology agency. An emergent lesson is that for Ethiopia or other developmental states, technological development latently and openly benefits elite classes but may disturb the multifarious and contradictory practices of everyday life of the subalterns.

Four component arguments are used to bring out the state, society, and technology nexus to the fore. *Under Construction* argues that state led infrastructural development at one level is used to create symbols of a society moving towards modernity. On another level this development is instrumentally used as a political stratagem in two major ways. First, construction is used to reinforce a dominant ideological superstructure that secures legitimacy for the political dispensation of the day, for instance, through dovetailing project completion with national elections or re-christening donor-funded construction projects as government projects. Second, infrastructure also encapsulates the present initiatives in the past, e.g. as a patriotic continuation of the vision of the late president Meles Zenawi. However, for all the development linked construction projects there is an intersection of diverse interests and

priorities, reflected in relocations; elitist town planning regulations, and general disproportionate realization of benefits and costs of development. Construction is therefore an arena for exploring the nexus between citizens (or labor), the state, and attendant materials or technologies where subterranean relations materialize. The infrastructural developments are used by the state as a secular ideology based on various devices including linguistic symbolism or poetics, myth, and history to mobilize the Ethiopians towards an imagined future, as well as a pragmatic stratagem for political contests.

Chapter 3 does not discuss a particular infrastructural development but operationalizes the concept of affect: the determinants of a state's legitimacy *vis a vis* infrastructural projects. Focusing on the city of Jimma, young people and the other citizens show a continuum of feelings from hope to despondency. The visceral disposition is time and place bound; for instance, for one of the respondents, enrolment for an engineering degree brings hope and constructs a feeling of belonging to the here and now. However, for the same actor, dilapidated infrastructure and construction work in limbo: it wearies the heart and casts doubt and skepticism about the "nostalgia of the future." Road construction is a political process because it brings about regularization and regulation and thus implies an interface of flexibility and improvisation. One's access to and control of social capital influences outcomes regarding the costs and benefits of infrastructural development.

In *Under Construction*, Mains presents the ambivalence of development and the dynamics of social change. The book successfully avoids the trap of classifying development as bad or good but imaginatively reveals how "modernity" is appropriated by a complexity of interest groups. Methodologically the book addresses a gap in development studies where there is a need for ethnographically based research that shows how the practice of development is reconstituted in locally situated practices. There is a complex mixing of things and people, akin to Latour's (1993) concept in *We Have Never Been Modern*, of a seamless fabric of lived

experience which results in hybrid forms and affections. As a result, the book contributes to a theoretical and applied rethinking of discourses and practices of development and how it intersects the everyday encounters of different sets of people. The book presents, and this is one of its numerous strengths, new research findings and speaks to existing themes in development studies and anthropology of development like modernization, modernity, globalization, and de-politicization, among others.

However, were the book to be revised, the study needs to further deepen the analysis beyond presenting the communities as homogenous in their encounters with development: for instance, *inter alia*, it talks of Jimma's *residents* (95); *residents* (96), *Urban residents* (120 and 109). Communities as an analytical category, more so urban communities, are not analogous to Redfield's (1955) ideal type of the little community in *The Little Community: Viewpoints for the Study of Human Whole*. To the contrary, the work conflates the young and the old, as well as the employed and the unemployed under generic terms even in cases where one would expect heterogeneity and contradictory value systems.

On page 95, the author unquestioningly reproduces an anthropological *faux pas*; the view that relationships, intimate or otherwise, in Africa are based on exchange. One wonders if this is any different in other parts of the world where contours of service provision, associations, including marriage are class-based. More seriously and ethically for an anthropologist who claims to have been involved in longitudinal and diachronic research in Ethiopia, one would expect some nuanced and balanced views of the *modi operandi* of other cultural repertoires.

In Chapter 4, the relationship between owners and drivers of the three-wheel motorcycles is not addressed adequately. We are not given enough information on recruitment, which may explain why there is no salient confrontation between owners and drivers as is the case with drivers and the state. Furthermore, the concept of affect may explain why it is easier

to confront the state. The absence of details of owner-driver relations makes the Bajaj regulation discussion somewhat incomplete.

*Under Construction's* strength is in its historical depth and social political contextualization presented in clear language. Theoretical arguments are well-presented and empirically supported, linking well with topical development literature. The book is valuable to both development practitioners and students of anthropology of development.

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