
URL: http://tiny.cc/AR640

Review by Adam Ewing, Virginia Commonwealth University

This is an exhilarating, insightful, ambitious, sometimes vexing essay. Like all great work, it provokes as many questions as it answers. It announces the arrival of an exciting new scholar in the field.

In 1935, as Italian dictator Benito Mussolini publicly clamored for—and then executed—Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia, and as strategists in Britain, France, the League of Nations, and the Comintern hemmed and hawed, an interracial, transcontinental, motley collection of leftists and antifascists mobilized in opposition. Fronczak argues that these activists, lacking a formal leadership structure, instead enacted “a shared repertoire of informal political practices”—civil disobedience, mass meetings, strikes, marches, street violence, and riots—that united radicals “across space, race, and class” (246). By acting out “the material reality of a global left,” common leftists succeeded in creating one. When, in August 1935, the Comintern formally discarded the dour, party-first discipline of the ‘third period’ and announced a Popular Front to confront fascism, it was acknowledging what workers, citizens, and colonial subjects in Paris, London, Harlem, Accra, Kingston, Istanbul, Calcutta, and elsewhere had already accomplished in fact.

Historians of the African diaspora have long recognized the scope and significance of the Hands Off Ethiopia movement.1 What is really eye opening here is the confidence with which Fronczak wields the methodological

---

tools of the transnational turn. In far-flung cities linked by interwar circuits of migration, commerce, and communication, activists came to understand the Hands Off Ethiopia movement both as a marker of global solidarity and as a device through which to enact local political claims. The movement was effective precisely because of this versatility—because, without a formal leadership or a precise organizational apparatus, it could remain many things to many people. By looking across national borders, outside of formal structures, and within new sites of transnational exchange (for example, riots), Fronczak illuminates the power of common people to shape—and be shaped by—international affairs. More than this, he demonstrates the manner in which transnational history can reveal “the social and political coproduction at work among different spatial scopes”—the power of reciprocal exchanges between local and global identities, ideologies, and politics (270, emphasis in original). This is not merely an essay that introduces new actors into old disciplinary debates. Rather, it affirms the oft-noted promise of the new diplomatic history to reshape the field from the ground up by paying attention to what was happening on the ground.

Fronczak is not satisfied simply demonstrating the centrality of the Hands Off Ethiopia movement to the geopolitical debates and imaginaries of 1935. Instead, building on Lisa McGirr’s suggestion that the global mobilization in defense of anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti “brought the popular masses for the first time to the forefront of international protest,” he argues that Hands Off Ethiopia was the moment when common folk graduated from battles against “domestic discriminations,” moved beyond their “symbolic protest politics,” and “asserted themselves in international affairs” (272). It is an origin story revealing in both its presences and its absences. For all of the hay Fronczak makes about decentering the nation in his analysis, he seems to accept a view of geopolitics in which state-interested Realpolitik was transcended only during the Depression years, when—as he quotes Eric Hobsbawm, “the contest of states” was replaced by “an international ideological civil war” into which mass politics could insert itself (259-260). But what if we take Paul Kramer’s fruitful recommendation and view global history using an imperial—rather than a state-based—framework of analysis? How does the genealogy of popular transnationalism look different if we consider the emergence of the modern world, as Lara Putnam suggests, through the linked transformations of race, nation, and empire?

---


And what if we look at source material that is not dominated, as it is here, by the archives of global black communism? Indeed, the decade-and-a-half following the First World War saw the flowering of multiple black internationalisms, of which black Communism was only one. By far the most successful and far reaching was the mass movement spearheaded by Jamaican activist Marcus Garvey, whose organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, established over a thousand local divisions in North American, the Caribbean, Central and South America and Africa, energized a number of locally constituted projects—labor unions, immigrant protection societies, culture clubs, welfare associations, independent churches, and nationalist organizations—and invited a sustained and coordinated response from federal authorities in the United States and colonial authorities across the Caribbean and Africa. Affixing the birth of popular geopolitics to 1935 relegates Garveyism—not to mention other black internationalisms—to the margins, minimizes the complex motivations undergirding support for the Hands Off Ethiopia Movement, and subsumes the fundamental tensions between a burgeoning, pan-colored consciousness and a class-based, leftist internationalism within a triumphalist narrative of a rising “global left.”

This is especially problematic when one considers Fronczak’s other big claim: The Hands Off Ethiopia campaign, he argues, allows us to rethink notions of an “old left” and a “new left” and instead graph “a longue-durée global left reaching from the Depression’s antifascism through the resistance movements of World War II to the anticolonial and civil rights struggles of the postwar era” (273). It is a formulation reminiscent of Jacqueline Dowd Hall’s suggestion that historians might, during nearly precisely the same period covered here, chart a “long civil rights movement.” Like Hall’s formulation, the notion of a longue-durée global left is both conceptually compelling and vulnerable to creeping vampirism. For just as Fronczak reveals the dynamism and complexity of local people’s global politics he traps them within a “global left” that merged into “a coherent force for much of the rest of the twentieth century” (272). Here the old fantasy of class-based solidarity is reversed. It is the masses, released from their suffocating institutional baggage, who recognize a common cause. It is not a vanguard building proletarian consciousness but the proletarian carving a path for the vanguard. The assumption of an underlying unity among ‘the masses’ (if only it would be unleashed!) animated the old left, of course, and it was rent apart by the persistent success of nationalisms and imperialisms, ethnic and racial chauvinisms, gender and generational status, among others, to cleave power in directions not contained by Hobsbawm’s “international ideological civil war.” If a lesson of the Hands Off

---


Ethiopia movement is that geopolitical power is produced at many sites and by many hands, it must surely also be that ‘coherence’ is provisional, situational, and fleeting.

Writing transnational history is daunting in part because it forces scholars to rub up against multiple historiographies, to stride bravely into pitched intellectual battles and turf wars, and to satisfy multiple constituencies at once. It is a field designed to generate both admiration and outrage. Fortunately we have scholars like Fronczak willing to engage in the fight, and to produce brilliant and thoughtful work that—both in its innovations and its limitations—propels our explorations forward.

Adam Ewing received his Ph.D. in History at Harvard University, and is Assistant Professor of African American Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. He studies the dynamics of power, identity, and political mobilization in the nineteenth and twentieth century African diaspora. Ewing is the author of The Age of Garvey: How a Jamaican Activist Created a Mass Movement and Changed Global Black Politics (Princeton University Press, 2014), and has published essays on Garveyism, solitary confinement, the work of Zora Neale Hurston, and the uses and theory of diaspora. He is currently working on a popular history of pan-Africanism.

© 2016 The Authors | Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License