

The Politics of the Social: Imagining a New Political Order in Ethiopia*

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Abstract

In studies of moral philosophy, social psychology, and social theory, the politics of grievance have been highlighted as key motivations for in-group political mobilization. Grievance is foregrounded to demonstrate the link between individual feelings and sentiments, as well as group-specific feelings that determine the politics of social groups. With this in mind, this paper attempts to show affective social values as a site of politics to reimagine politics in Ethiopia at a time when conventional politics has failed us. The point I want to make is, by (re)mobilizing emotive, affective, and sentimental social values, we could perhaps transform the political domain to echo the collective sensibilities of horizontal social relations of heterogeneous groups with a view toward responding to the multiple pains and sufferings ailing our society. To illustrate the significance of affective social values in reimagining the political, this paper focuses on the notion of ርክራካ (reherāhé) – translated in English as ‘radical compassion’. ርክራካ (reherāhé), as a sentiment widely shared across diverse Ethiopian linguistic and ethno-cultural groups, could have a *potentia* as a political concept since it is a feeling that entails moral responsibility to groups other than “one’s own” cultural community. This paper argues, ርክራካ (reherāhé), if reified as a social impulse expressed in language, can morph into a valuable political principle vital to nurturing an affective bond that ties those in distress to heterogenous collectives and communities in a given political community. Especially in a polity like Ethiopia—where impoverishment, war, and natural and human calamities are our unwelcome companions—ርክራካ (reherāhé) as a political principle could help the emergence of a more just society.

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Introduction

This paper is a reflective piece, an attempt to examine the utility of affective social values as a site of politics in imagining a new political order in Ethiopia at a time when Ethiopian society is afflicted by extreme polarization, sheer violence, and the specter of state failure. I believe there is a need to come up with alternative ways of thinking about the political, especially at this particular time in Ethiopia, when the failure of conventional politics is so palpable. So, beginning with a brief critique of social contract theory, my main interest in this paper is elaborating a politics of the social that seeks to see sociality and the politics of living together as a way of thinking about politics. By focusing on the “deep” relations extant in horizontal social relationships, I seek to examine the social as a generative site for re-imagining the political. The politics of the social envisages politics as something that is enunciated from lived social practices and the values that govern social relations. By centering my inquiry on social assets, I would like to show how we can re-imagine the political by emphasizing the political efficacy of horizontal social relations. To my mind, re-imagining a new political order at a time when conventional politics has thrown society into crisis demands that the political is conceptualized differently, in a way that interrogates the doxa that the state is the bastion and privileged space of politics. It is with this belief that, in this paper, I choose to strategically foreground an aspect of politics that concerns the movement and impulse of society to govern itself. I argue, through the deployment of the cultural resources, social assets, and sentimental ties and sensibilities embedded in horizontal social relations, we can re-imagine a new political order in Ethiopia. To demonstrate this, I attempt to show how **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) (an Amharic term defined here as radical compassion), as a commonly shared sentiment and sensibility found among diverse linguistic and cultural communities in Ethiopia, could be used to (re)build substantial social bonds between them. Through an archaeology of **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*), this essay seeks to show how this sentiment could be developed into a political principle nurtured by public practice to become a “civic virtue” that might help reimagine a new political order in Ethiopia. **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) is conceptualized here as a politics of the social

that can be cultivated in public practice for ethnocultural and other identity groups to “recognize” intergroup grievances.

The paper has three main sections. The first section is a note on social contract theory in an attempt to frame the issue under investigation. The second section considers the social field as a site of politics in order to recalibrate the way we think about the political and also envision a better future for society at a time when conventional politics seems to have utterly failed. The third section is an audacious attempt to think about the political efficacy of the emotive: an attempt to understand what the emotive, affective, and sentimental elements in our human and sociocultural world would help us to think about and do politics humanely.

1. A Note on Social Contract Theory: Framing the Issue

Social contract theory, arguably the most dominant theory of the state and politics, places a premium *on the state* and its laws in thinking about the political. It tends to give the state and the law the principal role in organizing political life. For social contract theory, political participation is often dependent on the subordination of “society” to the state. Often, “representative democracy” is given precedence over direct democracy, and electoral politics over self-government. Most social contract theories conceive of and seek to perpetuate the primacy of the state as an a priori condition for imagining political life. Rather than envisioning a political system where “society enters a ... [self-]instituting ... activity,” where it engages in the creation of political institutions through the management of its own community affairs,¹ social contract theory and “political liberalism” tend to anchor sovereign political power, either in the form of a sovereign with an absolute power (as in Hobbes), or a representative government that embodies the “will of the people” (as in Locke and Rousseau). In this sense, social contract theory is founded on a notion of politics based on “the consent of the governed.” In its various iterations, this theory of the state and politics has the primary purpose of sanctioning the everlasting legitimacy and perpetuation of the state by

¹ C. Castoriadis, *A Society Adrift: Interviews and Debates 1974–1997*, 5, 41 (2010).

granting or revoking position of power for an organized political body. Even if social contract theorists differed in their objectives, as some (like Hobbes) tended to rationalize the power of a commanding and authoritative sovereign, others like David Gauthier seek “to safeguard the individual from oppression by ... [an all too powerful] sovereign.”² Gauthier attempted to protect the individual from the excessive powers of an absolute sovereign by introducing the notion of “authorization” into Hobbesian social contract theory. “Authorization of political authority, and ... sovereign right” for Gauthier needs to be “limited.”³ It is by assigning “authorization a useful normative role,” he argues, that representative governments “obtain” legitimacy. For him, it is “only when the government is effectively the agent of the people, although distinct from them, is obedience [of citizens] to political authority fully obligatory.”⁴ In both these tendencies, however, the centrality of the state is seen as a necessary and essential condition for politics to exist.

Proposing alternatives to social contract theory, others espoused a more popular conception of the political and asked if it is possible to think about “a constituent power that is ... not ... constitutively juridical but nevertheless ... a political power.”⁵ Is it possible to imagine the political as something that is generated from a collective act of “self-legislation,” a social act of the people to make laws that govern them? Can we imagine a politics of the social, a form of politics that is borne out of lived practice and horizontal social relations? It is to this question that I now turn.

2. The Social Field as a Site of Politics

What is to be gained by conceptualizing the social field as a space for thinking about the political? While recognizing that “the political” and “the social” are

² Encyclopedia Britannica. *Social contract* (2021).

³ D. P. Gauthier, *The Logic of Leviathan: The Moral and Political Theory of Thomas Hobbes* 173 (1969).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁵ I. Lorey, *Constituent Power of the Multitude*, 15:1 *Journal of International Political Theory* 119, 119 (2019).

imbricated domains and that their energies flow into each other to constitute one another, there is value in distinguishing the social as a sphere of politics that has its own logic of relations. A strategic foregrounding of social assets that govern social relations will animate, humanize, and democratize the political arena. Shared social assets found in the sentimental, normative, and communitarian practices of everyday life can be employed to envision politics differently. *Social assets* shared across diverse linguistic and cultural communities in Ethiopia that have long served as moral adhesives that restrain excess and injustice could be used to remedy the failure of conventional politics. For example, ጡር (*tur*) and ነግበኔ (*nage bané*) can be cited as typical culturally embedded assets that reprimand excess by denying social legitimacy to morally indefensible acts of violence. While the first is a commonly shared notion in different Ethiopian languages that forewarns individuals as well as those in authority from harming others,⁶ the second is a social norm found in different Ethiopian languages that cautions that a misfortune that happened to an individual or a community today may happen to another tomorrow. By (re)mobilizing such social assets, we could perhaps transform the political domain to echo the collective sensibilities of horizontal social relations of heterogeneous groups with a view toward responding to the multiple pains and sufferings in our society at the present moment.

Similarly, mutual aid associations served as shared social assets that characterize social life in and between diverse Ethiopian communities. Mourning rituals and grieving for the dead is a community affair. እድር (*'edere*) (mutual aid associations of neighbors to mourn the dead) have long been sites where folkish solidaristic ties were fostered. Where death, grief, and mourning nurtured social cooperation and activity, they helped forge social cohesion in a society where “the community” is often a composite of heterogeneous groups. In the Ethiopian cultural orbit, the family members of the deceased almost never mourned and grieved alone. The whole neighborhood mourned with them. These communitarian bonds and the mutual aid assemblies that facilitated these gatherings have long helped solidify a

⁶ ጡር (*tur*) could be considered one of the fundamental normative principles governing associated life in Ethiopia, as it is shared by various linguistic communities in the country. See for instance ደስታ ተክለወልድ፡ አዲስ የአማርኛ መዝገበ-ቃላት (Dasetā Takelawoled, *Ádise Ya'amāreñā Mazegaba Qālāte* - Desta Teklewold, *New Amharic Dictionary*) 544 (1970).

sense of community and promoted communal care. They served society as spaces of generative social fellowships and covenants. They enabled the forging of networks for collective action through communal work, friendship, and neighborliness in heterogeneous communities. In this moment of crisis in Ethiopia, therefore, these social assets could become serviceable devices, vital to the activation of the social field as a site of co-existence and co-creation.

While the politics of the social is closely associated with culture and can involve social and cultural values that animate horizontal social relations, the politics of the social is similar to what philosopher Castoriadis calls the “[self-]instituting ... activity” of society, whereby society creates political institutions to manage its own community affairs.⁷ It is about the social practices of society that institute society, not only through deliberative politics but also in the ways in which social forces negotiate their relations in the social field. While not every social action should be seen as political, the political formativeness of social action has to be recognized to reclaim and strategically foreground the social foundations of politics.⁸ In this sense the politics of the social is not reduceable to the “cultural identity” of a particular society, as it also pertains to the practices that societies perform to sanction their social and political institutions. The politics of the social can thus be seen as sets of practices where society *transforms* its institutions through collective action.

⁷ Castoriadis, *supra* note 1: 4, 5, 41.

⁸ For a detailed discussion on what kind of action constitutes “political” action, see Adolph Reed’s *Class Notes: Posing as politics and other Thoughts on the American Scene*. Here, Reed criticizes the tendency in contemporary left scholarship on the meaning of politics. For him, many are guilty of “spinning [sic] narratives that ultimately demean concerted political action by claiming to find ... [politics] everywhere” (Adolph Reed, Jr. *Class Notes: Posing as Politics and other Thoughts on the American Scene* 86 [2000]). Reed is correct in signaling caution in this regard. If everything is politics, basically politics is rendered meaningless. While taking this critique seriously, it is at the same time important to note that the notion of “everyday life as politics” could be a useful way to recognize the political formativeness of everyday social practices and their linkages with explicit and/or organized political action.

3. In Defense of the Political Efficacy of the Affective⁹

Implicit in the rest of this paper is the question how a new political order in Ethiopia can be re-envisioned in a way that makes the political system is pliable and attentive to sensibilities that help forge social bonding between and among heterogenous communities that are polarized along ethnocultural and identarian lines. It is with a view to illustrate the significance of the affective in reimagining the political that I focus here on the notion of **ርክገራሕ** (*reherāhé*)—a sentiment with local situatedness that is commonly shared among numerous Ethiopian linguistic and ethno-cultural groups. I will argue that, if reified as a social impulse expressed in language, **ርክገራሕ** (*reherāhé*) as a political principle has the *potentia* to transform political life in Ethiopia. Given its moral appeal—its articulation and conceptual development in public life (say for instance in the academy, in art or literary circles) it could become a “civic virtue” with a prospect of furnishing the emergence of a more just society that is sensitive to human suffering. Especially in a polity like Ethiopia whose modern history is frequently dotted by impoverishment, civil war, and natural as well as human calamities, **ርክገራሕ** (*reherāhé*) can be a valuable political asset vital to creating an affective bond that ties those in distress. In this essay, **ርክገራሕ** (*reherāhé*), as more than a personal action-oriented concern (affect) for the suffering of others, is conceived as a collectively shared sentiment and response to generalized and widespread “social suffering.” In this sense even if **ርክገራሕ** (*reherāhé*) is conceived as a “voluntary” act necessitated by social suffering, it can also be a sentiment that is incited by the mutual acknowledgement of pain and suffering generalized in a polity. This way it becomes also a moral requirement given primacy in social and political relations. However, it is worthy of note that **ርክገራሕ** (*reherāhé*) is not the only action-oriented emotion. Emotions such as fear, hate, resentment, and others could also spur individuals or collectives into action. Therefore, **ርክገራሕ** (*reherāhé*) is not the only emotion that incites collective action. This is why any serious attempt to develop **ርክገራሕ** (*reherāhé*) into a political principle needs to understand

⁹ This section is greatly enriched by queries, comments and personal discussions I had with participants of the conference on “Between Failure and Redemption...”, who graciously but critically engaged with my presentation.

“its triggers”¹⁰—the conditions of its emergence. This means the factor(s) that trigger ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*) and the ways in which its political potentials can be realized should be given serious attention if it is to be made a “civic virtue” to re-order our political life, and perhaps to make our laws more pliable to the sensibilities and values that govern our horizontal social relations.

In studies of moral philosophy, social psychology and social theory, “the politics of grievance” or “indignation” has been highlighted to conceptualize and understand the link between individual feelings and sentiments and socially shared feelings, and their decisive role in determining the politics of social groups (especially identity politics, including but not limited to ethnic and racial communities). A well-developed theory of social conflict in this regard is what is known as “The Struggle for Recognition.” Recognition as a key political concept and principle is developed by articulating the link between the identity or “cultural particularity” of individuals with the shared “moral feeling of disrespect” of collectives. One of the most significant works on recognition is Axel Honneth’s *The Struggle for Recognition*¹¹ wherein the lack of recognition or the “moral feeling of disrespect” by social groups (classes or cultural communities) is emphasized as the main generator of political discontent and social conflict. The feeling of a lack of recognition that groups harbor, and the resentment that this foster towards other groups that are believed to deny recognition, Honneth argues, goes beyond articulating and fighting for the fulfillment of the economic

¹⁰ Mulugeta Mengist used this term in his reaction during the presentation of the first draft of this paper, at the conference themed “Between Failure and Redemption...,” to refer to the conditions that trigger ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*).

¹¹ Honneth’s point of departure for his theory of social conflict is Hegel’s political philosophy. Honneth regards Hegel’s notion of “The Struggle for Recognition” to be “incomplete” as it falls short of conceptualizing social conflict generated as a result of group-specific struggles for recognition. He says “Had [Hegel] consistently carried the logic of [the] process” that results in the construction of the social world as an ethical learning process leading, via various stages of a struggle, to ever more demanding relationships of reciprocal recognition “into the constitution of ethical community, that would have opened up the form of social interaction in which each person, in his or her individual particularity, can reckon with a feeling of recognition [which he or she feels with other members of his or her group] based on solidarity ... But this step ... is not a step that Hegel ever took” (Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* 62 (1995)).

interests of discontented groups. The expression and consciousness of the discontented groups' cultural particularities and their political implications constitutes what Honneth calls the politics of recognition.¹² For him the “jeopardizing ... collective self-respect [that social groups share amongst themselves] ... generates broad-based political resistance and social revolts.” Based on empirical grounds, he argues, the key “motivational impetus for political uprisings” is a sense of disrespect and “injury inflicted upon group-specific” identities and interests. Identity politics is theorized as a function of “hurt feelings ... [that] become the motivational basis for collective resistance.” According to Honneth, “only if subjects are able to articulate ... [these sentiments] within an intersubjective framework” and in a way effectively convey these sentiments as “typical for an entire group” can they become a tool for social mobilization.¹³ Honneth says: “The point of departure for a social theory of ... [conflict is that] the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction, as their social addressee.”¹⁴

Honneth's widely read and acclaimed theory of recognition puts a premium on intragroup feelings and their sense of treatment by others as the vital site where politics is generated. Moral feelings or sentiments such as **ርከራሕ** (*reherāhé*)—when shared by collectivities—are different as they entail moral responsibility for other groups. Struggles for recognition can be sites of social conflict due to intragroup feelings and politics that are about the “practical relation-to-self” that they nurture in a specific cultural group. **ርከራሕ** (*reherāhé*) as a political principle, on the other hand, is conceived here as a principle that seeks to grant moral responsibility unto intergroup relations or on relations between diverse social groups in a “political fellowship” or in a polity. I ask: could **ርከራሕ** (*reherāhé*) as a socially shared sentiment have political value while it remains a moral precept to guide the political life of society? Some would wonder that conceiving **ርከራሕ**

¹² *bid.*, 161, 166.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 164-68.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

(*reḥerāhé*) as a political concept beyond the domain of ethical and moral consideration disturbs the dichotomy between the moral and the political. But I argue that sentimental and moral precepts are not outside the sphere of politics. Moral and ethical conduct needs to be seen as integral to political relations between individuals and social groups in a society that is experiencing extreme social antagonism and hostility.¹⁵ As will be discussed in some detail in this paper, moral conduct can be key to determining social and political relations. In Ethiopia, this is shown to be the case, for instance, in times of extreme distress and social suffering like the famines and droughts of the 1970s throughout Ethiopian society, a community tied in political fellowship. But the question that remains unanswered is: *how could ርሕራሄ (reḥerāhé) (radical compassion) that emerges in times of extreme distress be made into a core political principle in this time in Ethiopia when society is deeply divided along ethnonational and religious lines?* I believe that the answer to this question could be developed using several strategies. The first is by examining how ርሕራሄ (*reḥerāhé*) could be made a “civic virtue,” a commonly shared value that guides social and political relations between heterogenous ethnocultural groups; this would further consider how we use ርሕራሄ (*reḥerāhé*) to deal with those who are in extreme distress (such as those living in extreme poverty or the mentally ill). The second asks how we conceive ርሕራሄ (*reḥerāhé*) as a political concept in a deeply divided and polarized political community and how we use it to deal with ubiquitous social suffering? The third strategy is to ask how we can cultivate ርሕራሄ (*reḥerāhé*) as a political principle in search of social justice and solidaristic action? The rest of this essay will elaborate on mechanisms such as these to think about and develop ርሕራሄ (*reḥerāhé*) as a political principle to reimagine a new political order in Ethiopia. It demonstrates the political value of ርሕራሄ (*reḥerāhé*), and shows how it can become a core political principle in a multinational and multiethnic society like Ethiopia's where social suffering is generalized and pervasive.

¹⁵ See below discussion on Edward Shils' notion of “civility” that understands “moral conduct” of individuals and groups towards one another as an integral part of “civil society.”

3.1. ርክራሂ (*reherāhé*) as civic virtue

In liberal political philosophy, civic virtue refers to “personal qualities” that individual members of society ought to have to facilitate “the effective functioning of the civil and political order, or the preservation of its values and principles.”¹⁶ In this context, to a large extent, the notion of civic virtue involves the “obligations” that citizens have to the state. These obligations include, for instance, paying taxes to promote and enhance the benefits of individual citizens as well as the public at large. Participation in politics either by being in a position of “ruling” or being governed (“ruled”) by giving their “consent” to the sovereign is considered a civic virtue in most liberal political systems. In addition, personal qualities such as courage and honesty are emphasized as essential civic virtues that individuals ought to have in most, if not all, political systems.¹⁷ Nevertheless, different political systems and political traditions highlight different civic virtues. For instance, the libertarian socialist tradition that is opposed to statism and the idea of “self-sacrifice” by the individual would have a distinct understanding of civic virtue.¹⁸ As Mathew Adams argues, the “sagacious ability to set aside individual prejudice ... [for] the common good,” or the courage to defend the polity, is distinguished from “self-sacrifice” and could be regarded as an important civic virtue¹⁹ that does not necessarily conflict with the *tendency to compete*. Nor is it always necessary to tame this tendency to imagine or build a political system that values cooperation. Cooperative political systems could nurture egalitarian values, practices, and attributes that they consider “civic virtues” without denying the existence of competition as a major tendency in society, both among individuals as well as communities. Most political systems, for instance, do not deny the social impulse to privatize property or the desire of individual citizens to hold individual opinions. In political traditions that underscore social justice and

¹⁶ M. E. Banyan, Encyclopedia Britannica. *Civic virtue*, (2016), www.britannica.com/topic/civic-virtue

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Matthew S. Adams, *Utopian Civic Virtue: Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Anarchism's republican Inheritance*, 1:1 Political Research Exchange 1, 2 (2019).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

equity as core political values, “civic fraternity” and “solidarity,”²⁰ as well as active public engagement in the affairs of one’s neighborhood, community, or city would be regarded as key civic virtues. Despite, differences in areas of emphasis, however, most political traditions understand civic virtues not as “inherent human qualities” but as attributes that should be nurtured and developed in a society so that they become significant aspects of public life and public practice that are necessary for a political community to “endure.”²¹ It is in this sense that I would like to propose the cultivation of ርክራካ (reherāhé) as a civic virtue in a political system in Ethiopia where social suffering is generalized. ርክራካ (reherāhé) for the suffering and the unjustly treated could, much like equality, liberty or “civic fraternity,” become a significant aspect of our public life²² in Ethiopia if we have

²⁰ Mathew Adams highlights “the emerging popularity of the language of solidarity in the nineteenth century, which ... occupied much of the conceptual ground of civic virtue in the socialist tradition.” (Gourevitch cited in *Ibid.*, 9).

²¹ Banyan, *supra* note 16.

²² In “The Virtue of Civil Society,” the American sociologist and social theorist Edward Shils argues that civic virtue can be defined as a “society of civility” or “civility” where “the conduct of the members of the society towards each other ... enters into conduct between individuals and between individuals and the state” (Shils, *The Virtue of Civil Society*, 26:1 Government and Opposition 3, 4 (1991). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44482551>). For Shils civic virtues are nurtured and developed in society as “polished or refined manners ... [to promote] respect for members of society. A society of refined manners was one in which the members acted with consideration towards each other, with an acknowledgement, institutionally embodied and assured, of the dignity of the individual, derived from his humanity and from his membership in the political community” (*Ibid.*, 8). Shils’ conception of “civil society” might be considered exclusionary to what Partha Chaterji (*Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy* [2011]) called “political society” (the poor and the disenfranchised members of modern society who do not partake in enjoying the rights of “Bourgeoise society” and for that reason expunged from it). However, at the same time, Shils’ notion of “civility” is instructive to this essay since “civility” requires that every member of society is accorded “minimal dignity.” For Shils, “the dignity which is accorded to a person who is [a member of the collectivity] ... is dignity of moral worth”, which every member of the collectivity is expected to give to all “including ... adversaries.” He says, “even though [some]... belong to different parties... communities or... ethnic groups” members of the collectivity need to have “concern for the good of adversaries as well as for the good of allies” (*Ibid.*, 12-13). While Shils’ discussion of civility is closely tied to what he calls “polished and refined manners” which “meant respect” for other members of society, and thus understands civility in the limited sense of “manners,” his idea—that members of society with heterogenous political affiliations, ethnicities, or adversaries must be treated in consideration of their humanity—makes his notion of civic virtue attractive to this essay. Similarly, it can be argued that ርክራካ (reherāhé) could be a civic virtue that ought to be

to reimagine a new political order where *difference* and the politics of recognition degenerated into a politics of negation. The insistence here is not that **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) is already a sentiment shared by members of particular ethnocultural communities in their relationship with *others*. Actually, in this moment of political and social crisis and upheaval, what appears to be the case is that nationalism (in all its forms—Pan-Ethiopian or particular) has become a cause for exclusion and negation.²³ The point is rather that **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) can and should be nurtured as a civic virtue since it is a culturally embedded sensibility and sentiment shared across diverse linguistic communities in the Ethiopian polity. **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) should be a moral and political principle that is not only desirable but also imperative in a polity that is undergoing extreme political instability and faces a real threat of state failure and social disintegration. In such a context **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) could be a vital political principle for establishing a more just and substantively more equal political community and society.

3.2. Preliminary notes on **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) as a concept and as a political principle

This subsection discusses **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) as a concept and a political principle in multiethnic Ethiopia. But before I go to a more elaborate discussion of what **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) means in the particular linguistic and cultural location of the Ethiopian polity, let me say a few things about how emotions are theorized in Western philosophy, whose dominant tradition tended to undermine the political efficacy of affective ties. This is necessary because our understanding of what is

accorded not only to allies but also those considered “the other,” “adversaries,” or even “the enemy”.

²³ See Semeneh Ayalew Asfaw, “A Response to Kebedu Mekonnen’s “Ethiopia: Moral Indignation as an Antidote to Collective Suffering—A Reply to Semeneh Ayalew,” Medium.com, (August 15, 2021), <https://medium.com/@miresemeneh/a-response-to-kebedu-mekonnens-ethiopia-moral-indignation-as-an-antidote-to-collective-9307d547aaad>. Here I argue that “Both pan-Ethiopian nationalism and identity politics have exacerbated the crisis of the moment, by predicating their nationalist activisms on the negation of what they consider *the other*. These nationalisms, *rather than nurturing positive, free expression of community and publicness*, I argue, *mobilized war-making speeches that caricature presumed opponents*, as enemies of peace, unity, sovereignty, development, stability, and justice.”

political (and what is considered apolitical) in the academy is mainly based on this intellectual tradition. The dominant tendency in the long history of Western political philosophy unnecessarily opposed emotion with reason. More often than not, Western philosophy conceptualized emotions and feelings to be a vector of irrational feelings.²⁴ Many philosophers of this tradition also doubted the status of “affective ties” as “secure foundations [sic] on which to rest moral requirements.”²⁵ This tradition tends to consider emotions to be “passive” and reactive than active, and uncontrolled and irrational than rational.²⁶ Notwithstanding some exceptions like Hume, the long history of Western philosophy saw emotions and feelings to be the opposites of reason.²⁷ By doing so, this dominant tendency diminishes the value of the affective in political life, except in major works like in Machiavelli (*The Prince*) where emotions are politicized.²⁸ This propensity to consign the sentimental ties that bond social forces and society to the outside of politics and to regard them as apolitical greatly undermines and downplays the political value of these sensibilities. The moral and ethical fields of social life are thus relegated as preserves of religious institutions. This essay resists the view that the state and the law are the primary seats of politics, and that sentiments have little to no political worth. In order to demonstrate the political potential of sentiments, this essay explores what happens if ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*) is

²⁴ A. Kişjuhas, *Reason Without Feelings? Emotions in the History of Western Philosophy*, 29:2 *Philosophy and Society* 253, 253-54 (2018).

²⁵ According to Andreas Eshete, Kant for instance, tended to “look down on our affections and affective ties because he thought them too fickle to serve as a secure foundation on which to rest moral requirements” Andreas Eshete, *Fraternity*, 35 *Review of Metaphysics* 27, 41 (1981).

²⁶ In the Cartesian tradition, for instance, emotions are “primarily” conceptualized as “the functions of a spirit, which were not actions but perceptions. When the human spirit perceived something that did not exist, ‘like a vicious palate or chimera,’ and also when it referred to one’s own nature (i.e., towards ‘the movement of the spirit’), it resulted in passions. In that sense, passions were caused, sustained, and empowered by the movement of the spirit” (Kişjuhas, *supra* note 24, 261, 254-55, 259).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 270. The opposition between emotion and reason in political theory and the undervaluation of the former in politics is a subject of discussion by a dissertation under preparation at Lund University, Sweden about the politics of the Nile waters by Wondwossen Michago Seid. My discussion here owes a great deal of insight to personal conversations with Wondwossen, as well as to reading the papers that go into the dissertation.

²⁸ According to Kişjuhas, Machiavelli sought to teach political leaders the ways in which they can use and “manipulate” the emotions of citizens and the ruled in order to control them so that rulers could maintain their authority (Kişjuhas, *supra* note 24, 260).

incorporated as a core value in different political systems and laws. **ርክራካ** (*reherāhé*) is understood as being similar to political concepts like “equality,” “equity,” “liberty” in the sense that these concepts also carry in them underlying moral qualities.

When moving toward a contextualized understanding of **ርክራካ** (*reherāhé*), defining the related notions of empathy and compassion is useful. While **ርክራካ** (*reherāhé*) is closely associated and shares affinities with empathy and compassion, an archaeology of the term in its specific socio-cultural and linguistic location is crucial if we are to understand the notion in a way that captures its idiosyncrasies and develops it into a political concept.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary provides the following definitions for “empathy” and “compassion:”

***Empathy:** the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner. It is defined as imagining, or having the capacity to imagine, feelings that one does not actually have.*

***Compassion:** sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it. It implies pity coupled with an urgent desire to aid or to spare.²⁹*

Not straying too far from the above dictionary definition, Hannah Arendt defines “compassion”—the English term that bears the closest resemblance to **ርክራካ** (*reherāhé*)—as a natural and selfless reaction to suffering. Arendt considers compassion a virtue that can be “an ideal basis for ... all mankind ... [to] establish

²⁹ The distinction between the two terms given in the same dictionary can be synthesized to highlight their differences. While empathy is about imagining, or having the capacity to imagine, feelings that one does not actually have, compassion tends to be defined as a sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it. It implies pity coupled with an urgent desire to aid or spare.

a society in which men might really become brothers.”³⁰ But at the same time, she dismisses the political value of compassion and considers it “politically ... irrelevant and without consequence.”³¹ Rather than inciting people to action, she argues, compassion encourages inaction. For her, “when the suffering masses are ‘lumped together into an aggregate,’ compassion [actually] becomes pity.”³² Different from empathy and compassion, I think the Amharic term **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) must be understood as *radical compassion*. While, like empathy and compassion, this involves the feeling of the suffering of others, unlike the two, it is a sentiment that also spurs individuals or collectivities into action. **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) is a form of co-suffering that is acquired by forging communion and unity with the anguished. As an affective and sentimental reaction to the suffering of others, it is a simultaneous process of feeling and thinking that springs one into action. And, as a way of forging a communion with the anguished it can be seen as the opposite of the desire to have dominion over others. It is a way of identifying with another that incites social action. Moreover, in contrast to compassion (both in its dictionary meaning as well as in Arendt’s definition), it does not imply pity; as opposed to empathy, it is not limited to imagining the feelings, thoughts and experiences of those suffering. While a selfless act towards the suffering of others is a key attribute of compassion, as in Arendt, in Amharic (and presumably other Ethiopian languages) **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) seems to impose a higher level of selflessness—i.e., self-sacrifice. This is true for instance in different Ethiopian communities, where women and girls are socialized to *live for* others. For example, mothers are required to sacrifice for their children. In Ethiopia, women conventionally tend to be seen as more naturally predisposed to **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) than men. The thinking that females are coded (presumably by nature) to live for others is a notion that is pervasive in this society. The figure of the mother, as more compassionate, nurturing, giving, and tender tends to ratify the image of a self-

³⁰ A. Sharon, *Solidarity without sentimentality*, 70: 2 *Raisons politiques* 97, 105 (2018), <https://www.cairn-int.info/journal-raisons-politiques-2018-2-page-97.htm>

³¹ Arendt affirms the view that emotion is passive. She says, “Thought is related to feeling and transforms its mute and inarticulate despondency, as exchange transforms the naked greed of desire and usage transforms the desperate longing of needs” (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* 168 [1998]).

³² Arendt cited in Sharon, *supra* note 30, 106.

sacrificing female subject in our society. This gendered connotation of the notion of **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) is one of the factors that warrants its translation here as radical compassion. The other factor that dictates the addition of “radical” to “compassion” is the way in which **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*), in the Ethiopian cultural orbit, almost always entails practical action to assuage suffering.

Let me show further how self-sacrifice is closely tied to the gendered definition of **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) as an ethical standard that is demanded of females in Ethiopian society by citing an example from art. The example I would like to cite in this connection is Tamerat Siltan’s artworks that were composed of paintings and installations presented in an art exhibition in 2018 under the title “*Mektefua: A Biography*.” In this exhibition, the graphic and visual artist Siltan, foregrounds the collective experiences of women and girls by using that mundane object **መክተፊያ** (*maketafiyā*)—the wooden chopping board used in Ethiopian households—as a metaphor to (re)present the female body simultaneously as sites of productive vitality and the draining exertion of gendered household chore of cooking. Where conventional feminine identity is intimately linked to food making, nurturing, and catering, the exhibition projects an unsettling image of how the process of feminine identity-making is fraught with exploitation and violence exerted on female bodies. As Fanaye Gebrehiwot comments, this exhibition mobilizes the “domestic” object **መክተፊያ** (*maketafiyā*) to recite “the story of women’s daily performance of self-sacrifice ... that hides behind it.” Through the **መክተፊያ** (*maketafiyā*), she says, Tamerat exposes the pain and exploitation “that hides behind the idealized and overly glorified picture of **እማ** (’emā) the Martyr—the all-giving, selfless, near superhuman mother who ... gives up herself for the rest of” society. This, for Fanaye, is an ethical standard that is differentially demanded from mothers and females.³³

³³ Fanaye Gebrehiwot, *Mektefia: An “Inventory” of Pain*. *Mektefua: A Biography Catalogue* 6, 7 (2018). Also, an important archive that can be explored further to understand the image of the mother in this society is that of literary and artistic works such as novels, poems, and art works, as well as examinations in academic works.

While Tamerat's exhibits push us to think about how the መክተፊያ (*maketafiyā*) can serve as a motif that helps us *interpret* and talk about the sacrifices of women, at the same time, as the feminist sociologist Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant argues, such projections of women's strength, goodness, and self-sacrifice have been opportunistically exploited "to defend and maintain a stratified social order by obscuring ... women's experiences ... [of] suffering."³⁴ In this way, society imposes on women a duty to sacrifice themselves for the rest of society with the purpose of preserving the status quo that perpetuates their subjection. This gendered elocution of the notion of ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*), and the unequal and problematic realm of relations it seeks to establish in society, should be rejected as it perpetuates and entrenches the unequal gender relations in our society. Therefore, if we were to use ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*) in our political life and seek to make it a civic virtue, we would need to make it a shared sentiment in our public practice. This means that ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*) should be a moral requirement for all members of society, not just females. It is imperative to underscore, moreover, that this paradox of feminine identity-making that is authorized in our society and requires self-sacrifice as an ethical demand on women should be rejected if ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*) is to be made a political principle that guides a more equal political life. This consideration demands that ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*) be made a method of social relations based on the mutual acknowledgement of one another's suffering, a moral requirement given primacy in social and political relations. It must be conceived as a core value to reorder not only our "public" life but also our relations in the domestic sphere. Therefore, while ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*) could be highlighted as a way of dealing with the marginalization of the disabled or the economically disadvantaged, ethnocultural injustice, class exploitation, sexual inequality, political inequality, etc., it is also crucial that, as a political principle, it also transforms gender relations in our society. In this sense, ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*) could become a socially ratified value and a political principle that is mobilized to create

³⁴ Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant cited in Stacey Patton, "Mules of the World," Wellesley Centers for Women, (last visited September 6, 2022) <https://www.wcwoonline.org/WRB-Issues/the-mules-of-the-world>. See also Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance* (2009).

a new social and political order where it is used to deal with the concerns, needs, and interests of the vulnerable in society.

ርክራሄ (*reherāhé*) shares certain fundamental affinities with fraternity. Philosopher Andreas Eshete in a brilliant essay, “Fraternity” (1981) elaborates on this notion as a “civic virtue.” Andreas starts his essay by asking “what must be shared by men in order for fraternity to exist between them?” The answer for him is that civic fraternal ties arise not from natural unions (such as “domestic bonds” that are based on natural kinship or love) but as a result of ties between individuals who share a certain cause or a “public ideal.”³⁵ He says that “fraternity represents the diverse ways in which individuals are freely drawn together by their common humanity,”³⁶ not by those necessarily motivated by “self-interest” but by those with “shared sentiments.”³⁷ Arash Davari takes his cue from Andreas to argue that fraternity is a shared “affective and sentimental bond” that involves the building of alliances and the cultivation of common “visceral” bonds.³⁸ Like civic fraternity, **ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*) is an affective and sentimental bond that could be nurtured to deal with a social problem or a cause. Civic fraternity as theorized by Andreas is a civic virtue that is developed by “individuals ... freely drawn by their common humanity” in “institutions within a nation and in associations that cross national boundaries.”³⁹ **ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*) could be built on a recognition of suffering. Further, it is nurtured as a public practice and a sentiment that arises from the seat of our guts and is incited by it. It is a visceral reaction that occurs when we witness the pain and suffering of others with whom we are bonded in a “political fellowship.” In this sense, therefore, with a view of its particular iteration in an Ethiopian linguistic and cultural context, I want to talk about its political vitality, not mainly as a moral requirement towards *all humankind*, but as a civic virtue

³⁵ Andreas, *supra* note 25, 27.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁸ Arash Davari makes a distinction between solidarity and fraternity. While he characterizes solidarity to be a show of support that is “limited to acts of articulation” and “expression,” he considers fraternity to be an elevation of solidarity as it seeks to build alliances with those one is in fraternal ties with (*Solidarity to Fraternity*; 210 Radical Philosophy 87, 88 2021]).

³⁹ Andreas, *supra* note 25, 37, 38.

and political principle useable to those found within the Ethiopian state. Its useability within the Ethiopian polity is emphasized in this essay because this essay is written at a particular moment in Ethiopia when extreme political crisis has generated alarming levels of social hostility and political and social disintegration. A conception of **ርክራኝ** (*reherāhé*) that emerges from the particular spatio-cultural context of the Ethiopian polity in this moment could be crucial to recalibrating social bonds between heterogenous communities. **ርክራኝ** (*reherāhé*)'s poignancy as a concept, political principle, and civic virtue to our present condition, therefore, lies in its insistence on the humanity of those considered to be “the other,” who also should require our radical compassion, not out of *pity*, but as fellow members bonded in common collective fellowship.

The above discussion on the particular usability of **ርክራኝ** (*reherāhé*) in an Ethiopian context brings us to a discussion of the moral responsibility that affective ties like **ርክራኝ** (*reherāhé*) and civic fraternity demand from members of the Ethiopian polity. With regard to fraternal bonds, Andreas notes that moral responsibility is required from those in civic fraternal ties. He says, “it is impossible to flout the moral responsibilities of fraternity without forfeiting fraternal bonds.”⁴⁰ In a more specific context, Keadu Mekonnen makes an important distinction between what he calls “moral” and “ethical” communities to determine the degree of moral responsibility we bear as members of a given political community. He argues that, for human beings, “it is ... proper to mourn the loss of life or egregious abuses of rights committed against” other human beings in a political community. While “one may ... feel morally indignant about such evils and spring[] to action to alleviate their suffering,” it is, however, difficult to “blame others” who are part of another political community “for failure to feel indignant on their behalf.” Keadu notes, “solidarity groups” such as people who are members of a state and are “associated by communal ties and political fellowships impose special [ethical] responsibilities” on members of that particular community. In such ethical communities, he suggests, “the suffering of ... fellow compatriots must ... elicit a sense of guilt and moral outrage.” For Keadu, “these fitting responses are required, [they are] not optional” for those

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

that are in “political fellowships” who are members of a polity.⁴¹ It follows, therefore, that radical compassion, like civic fraternity, also entails moral responsibility to one another. For instance, it is impossible for an individual or a community who feels **ርክራኝ** (*reherāhé*) to be involved, directly or indirectly, in the suffering of those they are in sentimental bonds with. Tacit complicity in harm done to others who are members of our political community, or direct participation in their suffering (either by supporting a political system that harms them or perpetuating their consignment) must therefore be rejected by those in sentimental bonds of **ርክራኝ** (*reherāhé*).

ርክራኝ (*reherāhé*), as a sentiment shared across cultural communities in the Ethiopian polity, could be (re)mobilized to bind individuals and ethnocultural communities that are drawn together by a sense of fragility and vulnerability of the human condition in this particular polity. As a cultural resource, it seems to me that **ርክራኝ** (*reherāhé*) is “aroused” by a deep sense, and even realization of, pain, suffering, and plight. It is a sentiment that grew from and could be further nurtured in a context, and on the soil, of extreme impoverishment and precarity. In the Ethiopian cultural setting, this sentiment is wired in a national psyche that is deeply conscious of the inherent precariousness of human life. The realization of this insecurity rests on a profound recognition of the human condition. In this sense, **ርክራኝ** (*reherāhé*) needs to be conceived as a civic virtue that avoids “facile hierarchies” or “comparisons” between one form of suffering, pain, and oppression over another. **ርክራኝ** (*reherāhé*) could be developed in our public life in such a way that it avoids “zero-sum competition” between the suffering of different ethnocultural communities. It ought to be nurtured as a public ideal and practice to promote “mutual respect” and mutual acknowledgment “for each other’s pain in the wake of histories of violence and trauma.”⁴²

⁴¹ Keadu Mekonnen Gebremariam, “Ethiopia: Moral Indignation as an Antidote to Collective Suffering—A Reply to Semeneh Ayalew,” Medium.com (August 10, 2021), https://medium.com/@kebadum?source=post_page-----eeb818b0577

⁴² Social Anthropologist Steven Robins (15 April 2021), in his discussion of the risks of “competitive memory” between racial communities in the context of South Africa, argues that “facile

3.3. ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*) as politics of the social: Past and present

ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*) in the Ethiopian polity is known to have generated collective action in recent history. ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*) as a cultural resource and affective sensibility sensitive to suffering elicited a sense of affinity and identification with the sufferer, whereby this identification had become an occasion and basis for social action and a sense of camaraderie between those tied in political fellowship. Far from being a passive emotion that encourage inactivity, ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*) in our recent history has led to the emergence of mutual aid communities and folkish solidarities. This is particularly the case in times of calamities of devastating proportions, like famine. For instance, the Ethiopian famines of the early 1970s that coincided with the 1974 Revolution witnessed the flourishing of numerous youth associations and registered the coming together of mainly high school students, along with merchants, civil servants, teachers, workers, and other members of urban society. This was especially true in the nation's capital, where people organized relief efforts—to feed, clothe, and shelter compatriots affected by these famines. Collective and autonomous activity, particularly during the early months of the Ethiopian revolution, have demonstrated the capacity, creativity, and commitment of society to organize itself, and suggests to us the political validity of societal self-organization that could be incited by sentiments like ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*).

Youth groups organized themselves in various associations in the capital and mobilized to support the those battered by famine in 1974. The relief efforts of students at what was then Haile Selassie I University prompted by the presence of more than a thousand famine victims in Addis Ababa in March 1974 turned into a large-scale youth activity where high school students took up the mantle. This cohort of the famine-affected who travelled hundreds of kilometers under strenuous conditions, all the way from Tigray and Wollo, to come to the capital in

comparisons” between the suffering of communities has the danger of undermining cooperation between those who underwent a history of trauma and political violence (Steven Robins, “Lwazi Lushaba and his Hitler analogy: The cul-de-sacs and conundrums of ‘competitive memory,’” Daily Maverick, April 15, 2021).

the wake of the civilian popular protests that started in February 1974 created an occasion for the collective mobilization of residents in the capital. This legion, among the most disenfranchised of Ethiopian society, picketed the gates of the imperial parliament, located along what was then Constitution Square. After their arrival in March 1974, they held that ground using the center of the city as their theatre of protest, refusing to leave unless their petitions were heard and their pleas addressed by the imperial government. Their presence in the capital created the opportunity for university students, high schoolers and other residents of Addis Ababa to organize—independent from the government—and provide relief to these picketers and famine victims elsewhere in the country.⁴³ The two-day hunger strike by Haile Selassie I University students was accompanied by the distribution of food and clothes to the picketers on April 4 and 5, 1974. The picket continued for weeks to come. University students boycotted classes and staged demonstrations on their campus premises carrying slogans like “poverty is not a crime” and “land to the tiller.” In the following months, relief work multiplied. School students and youth associations tended to the daily upkeep of the parliament picketers and travelled to areas most affected by the famine, distributing food and clothes to tens of thousands of people, especially in the province of Wollo. The famine inducted a period of autonomous youth self-activity that continued in earnest, at least until the end of June 1974. It galvanized popular discontent and public action and became a platform for the politicization of youth associations and networks in the capital.

The famine created a political context wherein Addis Ababa’s youth found common cause with those in distress, and an opening for self-organizing on a matter of great social and political importance. The energy that the social protests of 1974 lent to these efforts, as well as the organizing that the famine problem brought to spurred among the youth, resulted in the burgeoning of new autonomously operating youth ግንባራዎች (*māhebarāte*, or associations) and

⁴³ Semeneh Ayalew Asfaw, “The Young and the Urban in Addis Ababa: Towards a popular history of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution, c. 1950s-1974,” 53-56, (PhD Thesis: University of Cape Town, 2021). It must be noted that university students announced the famine and tried to provide relief earlier, but their relief did not attract a lot of public visibility in national politics (Kissi cited in Semeneh, 62).

networks that also reinvigorated old ones. Some youth associations even went as far as officially breaking from the national youth body, the Ethiopian Youth Services, to proclaim their independence. The scale of the famine and the enormity of its carnages generated a strong sentiment of **ርክራኝ** (*reherāhé*), anger, and militancy, that further fueled opposition against the regime and boosted active civic engagement.

This history of self-organizing and civic action that occurred not too long ago illustrates the potential of **ርክራኝ** (*reherāhé*) to create substantive social bonds in our society. Contrary to the view that sentiments do not have political utility, the above example shows that **ርክራኝ** (*reherāhé*), as an action-oriented sentiment, has a capacity to impel the formation of solidaristic communities. It demonstrates that **ርክራኝ** (*reherāhé*) could generate concrete social action, particularly in times of great calamity of national scale. In this sense, it has a potential to transform this polity from the ways in which we reimagine our social relations, to the ways in which our laws reflect our cultural resources, social assets, and sensibilities embedded in horizontal relations. **ርክራኝ** (*reherāhé*) mobilized collectives to form communions with and help those in distress. The famines of the 1970s created the conditions for the emergence of a community that “co-suffered.” This was a community of those co-suffering, composed of not only the starving and the hungry, but also of others in the social collective who were spurred into action to deal with famine as a shared misfortune. The fact that grotesque images of emaciated bodies were captured and broadcast through the medium of television, arguably, made this one of the most widely mediatized famines in modern history. This consequently left an indelible scar on the national psyche of Ethiopians for generations to come. The collective shame, indignity, and trauma that the famines of the 1970s and 1980s brought to bear on Ethiopian nationals is enormous. These famines are remembered not only by those who lived to suffer and witness their consequences, but also those that came after them. The association of the polity with famine, its synonymy with hunger and human calamity remains a source of great humiliation and dishonor for many Ethiopians. It is perhaps this sense of failure and the precarity of human life in the polity that created the conditions for radical compassion to flourish in the context of extreme hunger in 1974. This,

coupled with the revolutionary conjuncture of 1974, produced the conditions of possibility for autonomously developed communities that “co-suffered” during the popular protests of 1974.

The present moment in Ethiopia is replete with man-made and natural calamities. War in the north (massive displacements in Tigray, Amhara, and Afar) and in parts of Oromia, Gambela, and the Southern Regional State; blockade-induced starvation in and of Tigray; extreme political instability and ethnic strife in Amhara and Oromia; the ever-multiplying massacres and deadly violence, drought, a rapacious government, and unabated inflation (fueled in part by the global oil and energy crisis following the war in Ukraine) have generalized collective suffering throughout Ethiopia. Yet, selective outrage has made suffering superfluous. It has impoverished our humanity by throwing society into moral crisis and by rendering death, and massacre trivial and trauma mundane, even banal. The deep sense of human fragility wired into our national consciousness, as a consequence of the multiple experiences of human catastrophe in our recent history that are embedded in the sociality of everyday people in the Ethiopian polity, is being undermined and eroded by myopic choices and is turning us into “moral monsters” in relation to each other’s suffering—the suffering of neighbors, the fellow travelers who have long lived alongside each other in this polity. One wonders what levels of destruction we must witness as a society, what more devastations of war, starvation, displacement, impoverishment, and trauma must be registered to incite us to collective outrage, and prompt us to act against and reject the conditions of social or collective suffering. As discussed above, the opening that the revolutionary conjuncture of 1974 created was critical to the emergence of the radical compassion that furnished public action and autonomous collective activity to deal with the famines of the 1970s. The revolutionary Ethiopia of the 1970s makes evident that **ርኩራኔ** (*reherāhé*) as a collective action against social suffering had a close intimacy with collective outrage. It was not by accident that in 1974, disaffection with the imperial regime’s mishandling of the famine problem and its effort to hide it from the broader Ethiopian populace and the rest of the world coincided with the revolutionary upsurge of the popular protests of 1974. Indeed, the popular anger that the famine generated was part of the widespread discontent that produced the popular

revolutionary movement in 1974. The popular energy and social action, especially among the youth that organized aid for the famine affected, became one of the main forces behind the overthrow of the imperial regime in 1974.

How could radical compassion emerge in our moment as a public practice of horizontal cooperation? How can collective action be used to influence not only state practice *but also social relations and, by implication, the political life of various social groups in a multiethnic society with deep “communal cleavages”* to build social bonds? In other words, the question that needs to be answered here is *do we have, currently, the political opportunity for radical compassion to succeed?* Perhaps the political opportunity in the present moment is that we live in a moment where *everyone is a perpetrator and a victim somewhere* and that everyone feels aggrieved. This condition of ubiquitous grievance and sense of victimhood could be a ground where radical compassion emerges to become a core political principle where antagonistic social positions could be brought together to reconcile the social cleavages and hostilities that characterize our political life in the present moment in Ethiopia.

The ubiquity and democratization of social suffering in all corners of the Ethiopian polity could perhaps be seized upon by intellectuals, artists, cultural workers, and others in the social field to cultivate radical compassion as a political principle and pedagogy of survival in the present moment. This is to say that collective outrage is warranted in this moment, when social suffering is generalized and a situation persists where the excesses of the state as well as its massive failures are producing enormous social suffering and distress.⁴⁴ In this context of state excess or failure, cooperation between members of diverse ethnocultural communities, who are torn apart by the enemy-making political

⁴⁴ A bloody and ruinous war has been fought in the past 20 months between the Federal government, its regional allies, and the Tigrayan Regional State, generating massive destruction of human lives and infrastructure. The massive failures of the state to protect citizens from ethnic strife, massacres, and bouts of political violence that affected all regional states in the past four years are also accompanied by violence committed by state actors. Therefore, even if our present moment is very different from 1974 Ethiopia—both instances exhibit the reduced governing ability of the state, the proliferation of non-state actors, and wars waged and sustained by state actors.

discourses of the state and other powerful actors, could and must be mobilized to rebuild the social domain and continue as a society. Radical compassion, on the one hand, is a “move towards” the affective and the emotive, a substantive pedagogy of using pain as a way of thinking about an alternative politics—it proposes a politics of the social that is based on a distributive logic of caring for one another and mutually acknowledging each other’s suffering. On the other hand, as demonstrated in the mutual aid communities organized to distribute whatever material resources they had to support those affected by famine in 1974 Ethiopia, this sentiment was activated as a collective outrage (expressed through protests and social cooperation) against the injustices and failures of the imperial regime. In that sense, it was an act imbued with militancy against, and rejection of, the establishment, both the excesses and failures of the imperial regime that sought to maintain security of citizens. Hence, **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) can be developed in our present moment by bringing to the fore the social suffering of communities caused by military, economic and political powers.⁴⁵ Rather than “vicariously experiencing the feelings” of suffering experienced by another (as in the case of empathy), **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) is more interested in action to ameliorate that suffering. It is an action-oriented sentiment with political efficacy. It is a mutual-aid practice, nurtured in public life and social action and infused with a profound realization that what happened to one community or human being today could happen to another or to oneself tomorrow. It is this “knowing” or consciousness that mutual aid becomes a responsibility (not *pity* or an act of generosity, as in compassion) that obliges us to feel, see, and act. In this sense, **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) is a moral act, a moral responsibility for those with whom we are in political fellowship. It is an act that recognizes the dignity of all with whom we share a political community.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Kleinman et al. define “social suffering” as the “assemblages” of “human problems” that occur as a result of political, economic and military power “and how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems (A. Kleinman, V. Das, & M. M. Lock, *Social Suffering* xi-x [1997]).

⁴⁶ This discussion on the conditions of emergence of **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) has benefitted from conversations and gracious and critical engagements with participants of the workshop on “Speculative Practice and the Politics of the Wayward,” Windhoek, Namibia to Tombua, Angola, June 25-July 7, 2022. My special thanks go to my friends and colleagues Leigh-Ann Naidoo,

Where **ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*) as a social asset is enlivened by the totalizing catastrophe of our present political moment, it could be transformed into a civic virtue to improve the relations between ethnocultural communities. Even if it is in *reaction* and *response* to our present crisis that radical compassion is proposed as a way of reimagining a new political order in Ethiopia, its efficacy is not limited to dealing with cleavages and hostilities between ethnocultural communities. It can also be used as a generative concept to transform our political system and equip it to redress the manifold social inequities found in our society—to redress, for instance, socioeconomic relations or gender norms, as well as the way society deals with disability and mental illness. The broad social consciousness of this present moment of political crisis might be a fertile ground to produce this sensibility.

Should radical compassion start with or give primacy to the most affected, the most suffering? Does it involve the commitment to aid and support the most affected? This is a key question. This raises the question whether it is necessary or desirable to hierarchize between pain and suffering. To my mind, even if it is difficult to hierarchize pain and agree as a society which section or community is the most affected and the most suffering, it is necessary to use one form of suffering to build a rapport with another form of suffering.⁴⁷ Moreover, since radical compassion is a rejection of the conditions of social suffering, the questions of social justice and equity need to be highlighted as central to its practice in public life. For this to occur, a comprehensive political dialogue would be a key tool to cultivate radical compassion between communities that adhere to different cultural, national, linguistic identities. “Letting suffering speak” is a vital condition for a horizontal social cooperation, and public dialogue must seek to make suffering visible and legible to all those in conversation. Using pain to make legible the pains and sufferings of others means using one’s own pain to clarify the suffering of others, rather than making “facile comparisons” or false equivalences

Eugene Paramoer, Sharam Khosravi, Gabriel Dattatreyan, Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, and Paulo Israel.

⁴⁷ Melhik Abebe raised, in the conference on “Between Failure and Redemption...,” an important point in her reaction to this essay. She asked whether radical compassion should start with or give primacy to the most affected or the most suffering and asked whether it needs to involve the commitment to aid and support the most affected.

between different forms of suffering to either distinguish or lessen their significance. In that sense, therefore, while care must be taken not to assume equivalence between different forms of pain and suffering, one's own pain and suffering should be used to make the pain of the other palpable. It should serve as a basis or ground for cooperation. Dialogue and continuous debate could thus help radical compassion take root as an everyday social sensibility, public ideal and virtue, and could be a means to avoid a "facile competition" between different experiences of suffering. Hence, while cultural workers (singers, writers, poets, authors, artists, etc.), intellectuals, religious personalities, and so on could be key social agents who nurture this sentiment in the social field, more importantly a broad-based national dialogue to recognize mutual pain and suffering could provide a key, foundational moment for a new political order to take shape. For dialogue and continuous debate to be in the service of cooperation, therefore, it is important to recognize that the structural roots of various forms of suffering (political, cultural, or economic) are connected, and that appreciating one form of suffering aids the understanding of another form of suffering. It is imperative to articulate and define differences in political struggles—the oppression, violence, or suffering that constitute the subject formation and identity of various groups in a particular political community and society. This is crucial to building solidarity through the mutual acknowledgement of each other's pain and suffering without undermining difference and resorting to constructing a false equivalence between various forms of suffering for fear of what "those differences might say about ourselves", our history, and the inequities that they expose about our social relations. The coming together of heterogenous groups and communities around a public dialogue to articulate suffering and make it visible to promote horizontal social relations and radical compassion between diverse groups should not mean subsuming diversity and difference. As Audre Lorde says, in fact, "persistence in examining the tensions within diversity encourages growth toward [a] ... common goal ... [and] any future vision which can encompass all of us, by definition, must be complex and expanding, not easy to achieve."⁴⁸

⁴⁸ A. Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* 156 (2019).

Some worry that advocating for the use of emotive language such as “love” or “**ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*)” by people who wield political power is tantamount to “casting our pearls before the swine.”⁴⁹ They worry, and rightfully so, that these concepts and languages can be appropriated by politicians and self-interested political elites for sinister political purposes. The use of these languages by politicians and the state that taps into sentiments like love or **ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*), they say, can be used to cover authoritarian practices by the state, especially those that mobilize religious rhetoric to strengthen their hold on power. It is true that institutionalizing **ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*) could be a recipe for another problem—i.e., the risk of corruption in the hands of the state or powerful political actors. Alongside an attempt to give **ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*) a more “predictable progression,” and hence to get it institutionalized, there arises a risk and problem of it being corrupted by state actors. So, the question is: what form of institutionalization do we need to retain the “moral appeal” of **ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*) in a society and polity suffering from moral crisis? Part of the remedy to this problem could be found in asking whether institutionalization always involves the work of the state or the incorporation of such sentiments into the law. The main issue here is how to avoid **ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*) from being ossified as a state rhetoric. How can we protect sentiments like **ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*) from being colonized by the state and powerful political actors that are driven by parochial and even dangerous political interests or even used to legitimize authoritarian practice? To address this concern, I believe, “instituting” **ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*) as a core political principle and as an ideal nurtured in public social practice should be emphasized. **ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*) needs to be seen primarily as an ethics of social cooperation that is cultivated as a civic virtue; not as a state language preached “from above” to *manage* social relations (as a mechanism of building the legitimacy of those in power or as a means of

⁴⁹ This expression was used by Kalkidan Negash in reaction to the presentation when it was presented on 9 May (at the conference: “Between Failure and Redemption: The Future of the Ethiopian Social Contract”) to underscore the dangers of appropriation of notions like “love,” “compassion,” and “forgiveness” by state actors. Semir Yusuf also expressed similar concerns not only by drawing my attention to the dangers of appropriation of notions such as **ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*) by self-interested politicians, but also the risk of the institutionalization of such concepts by the state. This section “**ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*) as politics of the Social: Past and Present” has benefitted a lot from these interrogations, critical reflections, and concerns about the merit of using **ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*) as political concept and principle.

social control), but as a political principle developed in public practice to ratify the legitimacy of horizontal *self-governance*. This is especially imperative in the present moment where moral and political crises are upsetting social relations. However, as a public social practice, it can also perhaps be used to oblige the state and the law not only to guarantee the security of citizens but also to ensure the substantive equality and equitable treatment of all those that are tied in a political fellowship. This way **ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*) can be enacted in public practice to become a politics of the social that is less susceptible to the manipulations of the state and powerful political actors. The substantive social bonds that comprise the core values of collective outrage, action against injustice, and mutual aid that are embedded in **ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*) should be well articulated and mobilized to reenchant our politics and inform the design and conduct of “formal” political institutions.⁵⁰

One of the purposes of this essay (even if it is not a central one) is to make the state attentive to the political value and centrality of socially shared sentiments that help forge social bonding. However, my interest in this essay is not to see society and state as fields that “occupy parallel universes.” One key prerequisite for **ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*) to be used in the process of the “design and conduct of [formal] political institutions” of the state and the law is that the political system should further be decentralized to allow the practice of a genuine, popular, community-based democracy. In such a system, the state, along with its different tiers of governance (federal, regional, zonal, *wereda* etc.), is made just one element of the governance structure, not the only one. In such a political system, not every unit of governance is accountable or answerable to the governing party. This requires, for instance, that the *kebele* (the smallest unit of governance in the country) should be reconfigured to become an autonomous unit of popular self-government, as opposed to what it is now, the implementing organ and mouthpiece of the state. For **ርክራሄ** (*reherāhé*) to succeed as a political principle

⁵⁰ Even if some philosophers have deemed social bonds like fraternity, solidarity, and nationalism to be “incapable of informing the design and conduct of political institutions” (as in, for example, Sharon, *supra* note 30, 98), I don’t see how the self-governing capacity of a politicised public can be actualized without its making use of its capacity to persuade the state to incorporate the values, sentiments, and sensibilities embedded in horizontal social relations into its laws.

nurtured in public practice, the Ethiopian federal system should thus be re-designed in a way that ensures direct political participation of citizens in every locality. For radical compassion to become a core principle in our political life, and for it to be incorporated in the political institutions of the state and the law, local units of popular self-governance must be strengthened. And these units should animate society at the local and national-central level. Even if institutionalizing radical compassion is crucial for it to be “predictable and influential” in society, institutionalization should happen in the realm of society’s public practice. And, even if radical compassion as a principle is advocated for by social elements to enter the domains of the law or the governance structure of the state—it should be incorporated not as a policy of the state or the incumbent party but as a political principle and value that is promoted by social forces to resist all conditions of social suffering. In this sense, it becomes a principle that is mobilized to impose a negative power/right on the state so it does not become the arbiter or advocate of radical compassion. Rather, its legitimacy is put into question by society, where the state can be judged, interrogated, and removed for lacking in radical compassion. Therefore, by highlighting the role of society as a key agent of politics, I understand the governance structure of a political system as something not limited to the structure of the hierarchies of the state. It is in such a political order that radical compassion can become a principle that guide relations between ethnonational communities and between genders, classes, and marginalized communities in our society. But for this to be realized, ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*) needs to become a political principle and a civic virtue cultivated in public practice to guide our political life. Therefore, when we think of incorporating radical compassion as part of the legal and political system, we are talking about what the society does to politics and the state, rather than what the state does to the social. As a site of collective action, ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*) could play a role against state policies and practices that produce and perpetuate social suffering.

Foregrounding such virtues to guide social relations could help ameliorate the social polarization Ethiopia is currently experiencing. I believe, in this moment of political crisis where the precondition for the proliferation of social suffering is indifference, selective outrage and disregard for loss and pain of “the other”, we must insist on

reactivating such practices. It is through an “enduring process,” and over time, that affective bonds like **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) (and kin virtues such as civic fraternity) can grow into civic virtues. Not only is it crucial to give prominence to the practice of **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) in our public life to address the toxic problem of social polarization in this country, it could also play a pivotal role in co-creating a political community that is agonistic, without superficially collapsing structural differences and inequalities through false harmony.⁵¹ The built-in historical inequities, differences, rivalries, and contesting interests and conflicts could not be wished away or resolved through a superficial discourse of a “tolerant” community. Rather, to build a heterogenous and multinational/multiethnic community bound and enlivened by common values of moral restraint and interdependent horizontal social relations of mutual aid, we need to work towards building a democratic society where “agonistic confrontation”—the disagreements, differences, and diverse aspirations in our society—are continuously debated.⁵² The political domain should reflect and respond to the associated life of its heterogeneous groups as well as their concerns and aspirations. Imagining a new political order demands that we capitalize on age-old social practices, our lived horizontal ties, and cultural resources to reconstitute the social as a field of coexistence and cocreation where heterogenous “laboring communities”⁵³ thrive. Such a society should not only allow for the emergence of a political community that merely co-exists peaceably, but also should endeavor to create the conditions for a substantively equal and just political community to take form.

In the forgoing pages, I argued that **ርክራኔ** (*reherāhé*) is articulated as a form of social action whose content is also political, and which can be institutionalized in

⁵¹ In the liberal political theorist Chantal Mouffe’s discussion of “agonistic” democracy and “agonistic confrontation,” Mouffe contends that a democratic society “requires accepting that conflict and division are inherent to politics and that there is no place where reconciliation could be definitively achieved as the full actualization of the unity of ‘the people.’” For Mouffe, “agonistic confrontation”—continuous debate, disagreement, differences, and deliberations are vital in the creation of democratic politics in modern societies (Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* 8, 15-16 [2000]).

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* 140, 186, 283-88 (1996).

the form of social norm and nurtured in public practice. I do not want this essay to be read as a “discounting” of the state and its role in politics. The state is definitely relevant and its role in politics cannot be underestimated in any attempt to imagine a new political order. But, at the same time, the central argument of the essay is that politics should not be conceived as that which is reduceable to the state or its laws. The political emergences also in the social domain and in the realms of values, social assets, and the sensibilities of horizontal relations. Hence, while I recognize that the state is, in our contemporary moment, the main organizer of politics, we need to be cautious not to see the politics of the social as a mere extension of the state. The view that the political substance of society always emanates from “the state” obfuscates the political content of social relations, norms, values, and social assets. Therefore, the politics of the social should not be seen as the “social” manifestation of the state. Moreover, despite my insistence on the value and political efficacy of **ርከራኔ** (*reherāhé*), I am not claiming here that this is the only and most important social and cultural resource in our midst for reimagining a new political order in Ethiopia. It is just one resource, presumably among many, at our disposal that can be used to reconceptualise the political.

4. **ርከራኔ (*reherāhé*) and “National Reconciliation” as *National Forgiveness*?**

By way of conclusion, I would like to pose the question of whether radical compassion could be seen as one of the ways in which we can lay ground for the process of national reconciliation to occur and build a new political order in Ethiopia. A public practice of mutual aid through an act of radical compassion could perhaps involve “reconciliation” to *heal* communities devastated by various forms of violence (political, economic, and cultural). Reconciliation, or some would say “forgiveness,” could, through mutual acknowledgement of pain and suffering, be crucial to move forward or at least towards a more just and equal society.

For reconciliation to occur, **ርከራኔ** (*reherāhé*) needs to be used to deal with past injustices and lessen the weight and tyranny of our history. Not only would burying

past wrongs perpetuate old injustices, but also their un-acknowledgement and misrecognition can breed a politics of resentment that can spill over into our present and our future. ርክራካ (reherāhé) could perhaps have a place to “release” this polity and its populations from political and social hostility and the “wearisome sequence” of violence that past wrongs could generate in the future. As a virtue it has affinities with “forgiveness;” perhaps ርክራካ (reherāhé) could be a valuable asset to address historical injustices that arise from the predicaments of past actions. As Hannah Arendt, who lived through the rise of a genocidal Nazi regime, instructs, the “irreversibility” of past action imprisons human beings and polities alike in a cycle of “misdeed.” She notes that it is only through the act of forgiveness that both the doer and the sufferer are “released” from the violence and the quandary that past actions produce.⁵⁴ She suggests that unless we strive to acknowledge and address past wrongs, we might find ourselves yet again haunted by the destructive fury of their future lives. Despite the methodological individualism of Arendt’s discussion of forgiveness, which renders it inadequate to use in the social and political domain, the notion of forgiveness as a public practice that seeks to substantively deal with past wrongs can

⁵⁴ See Arendt, *supra* note 31, on the “Irreversibility and the Power to Forgive” (236-43). She says, “trespassing is an everyday occurrence which is in the very nature of action’s constant establishment of new relationships within a web of relations, and it needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done ... Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new. In this respect, forgiveness is the exact opposite of vengeance, which acts in the form of re-acting against an original trespassing, whereby far from putting an end to the consequences of the first misdeed, everybody remains bound to the process, permitting the chain reaction contained in every action to take its unhindered course. In contrast to revenge, which is the natural, automatic reaction to transgression and which because of the irreversibility of the action process can be expected and even calculated, the act of forgiving can never be predicted; it is the only reaction that acts in an unexpected way and thus retains, though being a reaction, something of the original character of action. Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven (*Ibid.*, 240-241). The same author on the consequences of human action: “Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer’s apprentice who lacked the formula to break the spell” (*Ibid.*, 237).

be a useful tool for national reconciliation, an aspiration that we in Ethiopia have been hearing about from the political opposition since the 1990s. Forgiveness in a social and political context could perhaps be conceived as an arrangement whereby reconciliation and “truth and justice” commissions may be held while institutional mechanisms to address the enduring consequences of past injustices are worked out as simultaneous processes. Moreover, it should be emphasized that forgiveness cannot and should not mean to forget in such a setting—that would be an oversimplified solution to a complex historical problem. This said, however, it must be underscored that calls for reconciliation that have been repeatedly advocated by the Ethiopian opposition, and which have been repeatedly rejected and ridiculed by those in power in this country, need to be heeded. Proposals for national reconciliation suggest there is a lot of interest and even faith in a negotiated political settlement through an all-encompassing process of transitional justice. Going forward, therefore, this insistence and advocacy must remain a key agenda to address the problem of past actions and past injustices and their real expressions in the dominant tendencies of the Ethiopian political system and society.

DISCUSSIONS

Dr. Mulugeta Mengist

I agree with you that as lawyers we focus on the marginal. For me law and the state are marginal; they are relevant only for the few in society. We can say that it is not the law but social assets such as compassion, that hold us, as a society, together. I appreciate the fact that you raised “radical compassion” as something that we can discuss. Yes, radical compassion is an action-oriented emotion. But the same is true for other types of emotion, such as fear. The kinds of actions it triggers are protective, taking the form of either fighting or fleeing the risk. “Compassion” as an emotion can be considered to be the opposite of fear, as it does not drive a person to run away but rather to engage with a view to alleviate the suffering of someone. I agree with your point regarding

radical compassion, but I also recommend you consider other emotions in the light of the issues being discussed.

Additionally, in order to ensure the efficacy of the deployment of emotions such as “radical compassion,” we need to understand their triggers by examining their anatomy. Questions include: What drives compassion? Why are some compassionate while others are not? What makes the good Samaritan act the way they act while another person may be indifferent towards the same suffering? These need to be answered. There is political potential in “radical compassion;” but focusing on the triggers could help achieve the result desired from the deployment of “radical compassion” as well as strengthening the social foundations and social capital that make the state and laws effective.

Melhik Abebe

I appreciate the coining of the term **ርክራካ** (*reherāhé*) as “radical compassion” because, unlike empathy, it implicates the person showing the compassion as an agent, rather than painting him as a bystander observing with pity. In relation to the point you made last, some of the challenges that I observe in the current state that Ethiopia is in pertain, for instance, to independent initiatives that raise funds to provide relief and other kinds of aid to affected people all over the country. In these cases we observe issues when determining who is the most vulnerable because this remains the basis for the distribution of the relief effort. Those providing the funds usually ask if there’s government involvement because they may be afraid that their contribution will be abused or misused by the government. Or even if the government is not involved, they ask the identity of the people behind the initiative to raise funds as they are the ones who determine where the aid should go. The lack of support to some who desperately need the aid is a problem. For this reason, the idea of radical compassion suffers, and this is also evident in the fact that there are unmistakable differences between the generations of the 1970s and our own; our generation has different idea of who is mournable and who is not, however radical that may be. So, how do we tackle that given the realities of our generation vs. those of the 1970s?

Regarding the essence of or what constitutes “radical compassion,” for me it is as simple as imagining and trying to advance a politics that addresses the pain and distress of the worst affected, the most marginalized, the least heard, and the most disadvantaged amongst us. In order to do so, we have to be as honest as we possibly can (as a nation) in determining who that is. I do not think certain people living in certain parts of the country or belonging to a certain class are represented equally or have their grievances heard and considered to be more vulnerable as others are because the method that we have been using to determine the ones deserving the relief first have been very self-serving and intellectually dishonest. If we can manage to address the pains of the worst affected and alleviate their burdens, in a way all of us will be saved. If you start only from where you are affected and disregard those who have it worse, it will just make the cycle continue and bring no true resolution to our problems.

Dr. Kalkidan Negash Obse

You mentioned the potential use of language as a sociopolitical asset for humanizing and democratizing the political arena. But I see risk in the use of these kinds of language as they could be used to normalize violence and foster authoritarian rule. In the past few years, we have seen increasing use of these kinds of language in governmental circles. For example, statements coming from the Prime Minister’s Office or Daniel Kibret have employed words such as መደመር (*madamare*), ፍቅር (*fāqere*), ይቅርታ (*yeqeretā*); language that we normally hear within religious and social circles have now become government language. This poses a great risk. Are we not casting the pearl before the swine? Of course, I am not presenting a general critique of the use of such language as they are social assets when used in their appropriate settings, for instance in the arena of civil society. But to what extent should we push the use of such language particularly in politics? Government discourse has become a religious discourse. The government is using social and religious language. Yet, this did not prevent civil war or the occurrence of atrocities, including by government actors. The use of such kinds of illusive and emotive language by people who wield political power could be tantamount to casting our pearls before the swine.

Dr. Mohammed Dejen

At the risk of generalization, our world is suffering from lack of compassion, or as has been presented, “radical compassion.” For persons to be able to show compassion, they have to feel the suffering of others, which you termed as “co-suffering.” My belief is that the compassion we speak of must be propagated by other institutions: religious, customary, etc.—the institutions that shoulder the responsibility of fostering compassion within society. As postulated by John Locke, the role of the government is to protect the people through its laws and arms, not by promoting compassion. The government in Ethiopia is continuously making use of religious language, thereby promoting compassion while failing in its primary duty to protect the people as they are subjected to suffering caused by different actors. What will happen if compassion fails? Is it not the responsibility of the government to ensure the safety of its people instead of simply promoting radical compassion?

Dr. Semir Yusuf

I appreciate your presentation for several reasons. First, for its originality. Second, the idea is an important antidote for the increasingly materialized, transactionalized, and morally trivialized politics of the last couple of decades, and we clearly need this kind of addition to our language. Therefore, it is an interesting way of introducing a concept we had not seriously considered so far, at least in academic circles. Third, the idea could also be used to transcend communal divisions in our society if we recast this idea of ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*), or radical compassion, in a trans-ethnic sense, as an attempt to build bonds across societal cleavages. It could fill a very important gap in our politics as well. Fourth, it empowers the social as a very important site of political action. Therefore, instead of concentrating on the state and what it does to society, sometimes we have to refocus our attention on societal values, attitudes, and activities, as sites of collective action, at times even against state policies.

That said, I have some concerns that would serve the purpose of developing the point you raised into full-fledged political concept. I have doubts about whether ርክራኔ (*reherāhé*) could be a truly political concept; it is rather a moral, ethical, and social concept. In general, I have four points of concern regarding your proposal.

My first concern is, how can we make **ርከራሄ** (*reherāhé*) a communal concept? It is essentially an individualistic concept as it is about the “individual person.” Therefore, how can we change it from a personal concept to a concept that spurs communities into action? That link is not clearly established. And there are comparable concepts in social science, for instance, “grievance.” According to Gerg Worth, grievance is generated when people are in relative deprivation that spurs them into action. Another concept coined by Lupsha is “moral indignation,” which is when people feel that such a sense of indignation that they are spurred into action, sometimes against the state. But a problem lies with these essentially personal concepts as they do not establish a link between the personal and the community. Here lies the problem of the collective action: how can you make sure there are no free riders in the process of mobilizing people to a certain goal? Because there are always rational thinkers or certain people who step back and wait for the result to come. So, how can we make sure that each and every one of us is involved in practicing radical compassion?

The second concern is, assuming that we have overcome our problem of collective action, how can it be used to influence state practice and praxis? That is the problem found by social movement theorists. Let’s say that people are equipped with moral indignation and we have mobilized massive number of people—can they really influence the state or politics? Can they really overcome the repressive tactics of the state? Social movement theorists explain by saying social movements do not always easily succeed; they do so only when there is political opportunity available for them to succeed. Therefore, the movement of society or mobilization of people does not necessarily translate, in effect, into politically impactful desirable acts. Therefore, your “radical compassion” should also pass this test for it to become a truly political concept.

The third concern I have is, how can we overcome the moral/political dichotomy? However radical it is, **ርከራሄ** (*reherāhé*) is immensely voluntary; it is based on my personal will to act on my **ርከራሄ** (*reherāhé*). So, in order to give it a more predictable progression, we have to get it institutionalized. And this is the beginning of another problem, because if we institutionalize **ርከራሄ** (*reherāhé*), will it be **ርከራሄ** (*reherāhé*) after all? It will be corrupted. Here Alex Vukovich is relevant: he says that religion and

revolution are the same; their success is their failure. Because, when religion or revolution succeeds to the maximum, they capture state power, they get institutionalized; that is the beginning of their corruption and they deteriorate materially, they lose their spirituality or revolutionary appeal. This is the paradox of **ርሕራሄ** (*reherāhé*) as well; when it is a moral concept it is fantastic; but the moment it gets institutionalized, and we come to believe that it has influenced state policy, it immediately loses that moral quality that makes it most appealing. How can we avoid this?

Dr. Mulugeta Mengist interjected and asked Semir what he meant by institutionalizing.

Dr. Semir responded saying: by institutionalization I mean laws, regulations, state practices, and institutions; anything that shifts **ርሕራሄ** (*reherāhé*) from being a voluntary moral concept into a more predictable social concept backed by political institutions and legislative measures.

Dr. Mulugeta interjected again and said: but you cannot legislate love, you cannot legislate compassion, and when we say institution it is an altogether different thing, broader than the state, its laws and institutions.

Dr. Semir continued to explain that, for **ርሕራሄ** (*reherāhé*) to be predictable and influential in a society, it has to be institutionalized.

Taking it from being a lofty moral principle to a more predictable social concept that can influence politics is the goal. This may make **ርሕራሄ** (*reherāhé*) susceptible to political appropriation. And that appropriation could sometimes take an ugly form, because when states or regimes appropriate moral concepts they not only deprive the concepts of their moral values, but also use them for a totally different purpose. For instance, if **ርሕራሄ** (*reherāhé*) becomes a state policy it could cause distinction between those who have **ርሕራሄ** (*reherāhé*) and those who do not have it, which may result in the state empowering those who are radically compassionate, which basically means those who fall in line with state vision for society and certain ideological patterns.

Those who do not align themselves within these parameters are basically automatically labeled as people without **ርከራሄ** (*reherāhé*). So, the state becomes a labeling agent, describing those who have it and those who do not. And those labeled as not having **ርከራሄ** (*reherāhé*) will become marginalized. So, the question is—how can we salvage this concept from being appropriated by the state so that it can be a full-fledged political concept.

Dr. Abadir M. Ibrahim

As Semir was concluding, I am imagining what Semeneh's replies to Semir's questions could be. I am thinking, standing on Semeneh's shoes but not necessarily expecting him to agree, that the plane of action proposed by Semeneh does not have to be statist—it does not have to be institutionalized into law since not all power comes from law and the state. It is also possible to imagine it in the plane of the social, i.e., institutionalization in the form of social movements or the development of cultural mores that may not need to be institutionalized—or not institutionalized in a formal way. This may not answer the question fully, but then, Semeneh could very well defer what happens after the success of radical compassion in the social or cultural spheres.

My question to Semeneh is: how can we bring such concepts as **ርከራሄ** (*reherāhé*) into social action? I am thinking of how does something like **ርከራሄ** (*reherāhé*) gain the momentum it needs to improve how we do politics? The historical examples you raised were excellent, but can we bring that to contemporary discourse, and if so, how do we get from where we are now to what is being proposed? I will also add that, from the discussion we have had so far, I get the sense that power, politics, and law are intentionally left out of your focus. However, that does leave one feeling that we are not addressing the elephant in the room. You cannot discount the state as that would have you think of radical compassion developing in the social sphere while the political sphere does not intervene in this process through physical power or cooptation.

Dr. Berihun Adugna

I will say two things. First, what we call the politics of the social and the politics of the state is actually a constitutional description of how the state operates in many countries, including ours. I do not even consider it as the social but as the constitutional. So, the state has the social wing, what we call politics of the social, and then we have the state and its institutions. The state functions within these two systems, and, to that extent, I feel that you accurately captured what has been going on. Second, the politics of the state is based on consent, hence it builds on culture, national identity, etc., but at the same time, it departs from it so that politics can be coherent and workable. So, because it is based on consent, there are many possibilities there. And the politics of the social as you present them seem to be about culture. It has an idea of institutions and politics based on some cultural resources; it is reactive and responsive to what is going on in the political field. But it seems to lack tools and systems to reject some part of it. Many African countries tried it, and it does not seem to work, partly because of the problems many of the speakers here mentioned. On the other hand, I do not see a problem in the transformation of compassion; the problem is who will transform it and how?

Dr. Adem Kassie Abebe

Semeneh, what you did is bring forth the foundation where all our ideas and institutions should begin from. I have a couple of points to make. First, your presentation sees state and society as occupying parallel universes. In my understanding, the state is part of society. So, to that extent, at the risk of implying too much into what you said, we have to think about how to make the state serve society rather than talking about centering one over the other. Are we not trying to reimagine where the state should fit within society? My second point is, borrowing from Silicon Valley lingo, I see the state as the hardware and the policies in place as the software. For me compassion is most relevant when we try to build the software to be able to run within the structure that we built. Third, I wonder if we should try and understand things based on recognition rather than compassion. I am not sure if compassion originates from recognition or the other way round, but I think that when building it as a political framework considering recognition over grievance and indignation may

be good. Regarding institutionalization, I see that equality and rule of law concepts designed to treat everyone on equal footing can be considered as institutionalized manifestations of recognition and compassion. So, centering it on recognition can be something worth considering.

Overall, the fundamental challenge is that humans cooperate, but they also compete in every aspect of their lives. Therefore, how can we make radical compassion relevant for a world where we do not just cooperate but also compete? How can we use compassion to tame the tendency to compete more than to cooperate?

A final point: I am not clear if your idea of compassion has its origins in the conservative politics or Christian or Islamic thinking.